
EMMA V. LEECH
ROGUES & GENTLEMEN
THE CHRISTMAS COLLECTION

A Rogues & Gentlemen Christmas

A Compilation of Christmas Novellas

By Emma V. Leech



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Table of Contents

Winter's Wild Melody
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Epilogue

The Christmas Rose
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Epilogue

The Winter Bride
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11

Epilogue
- The Girl is Not for Christmas

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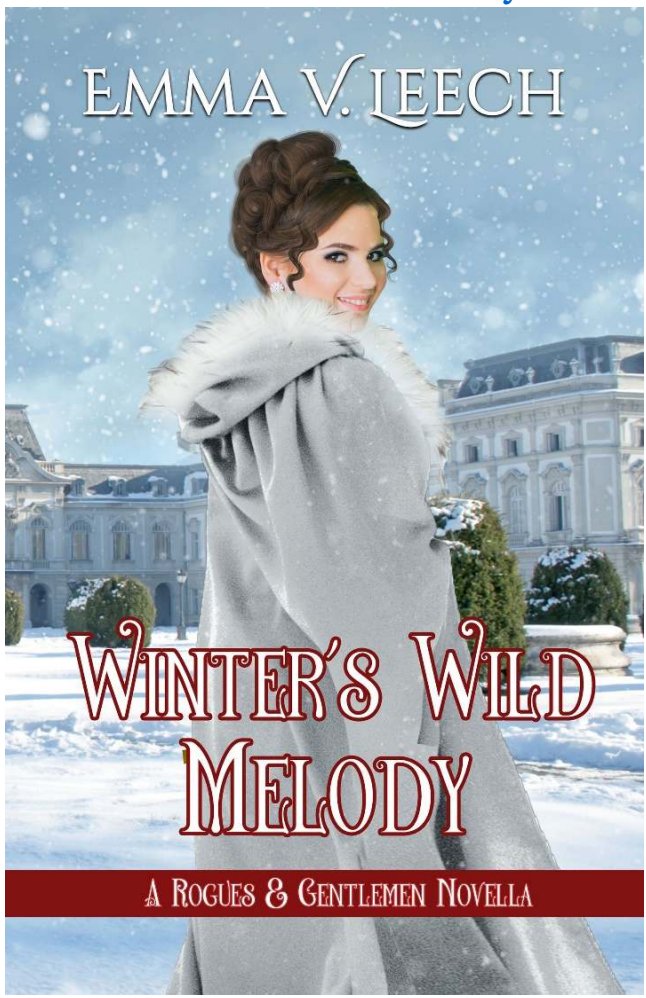
About Me!

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Audio Books!
- To Dare a Duke
- Dare to be Wicked
- A Dog in a Doublet

Acknowledgements

Winter's Wild Melody



Chapter 1

"Wherein a bit of a deviation..."



12th December 1817. Belvedere House, Dorset.

Chance had not intended to spend quite so long in the company of his friends. He really hadn't. Well, yes, all right, he *had* intended to avoid going home for as long as he possibly could, but… that was beside the point. The point was, somehow it had become the twelfth of December, and he'd been expected at home sometime… sometime on the tenth.

"Are you sure you must go?"

Chance looked around at his friend Tommy, the Earl of Stanthorpe. The earl was regarding the weather outside his luxurious home in Dorset with a frown of consternation. It had been damned cold the past few days, and was now threatening to snow.

"Yes, very sure. It will take me two days if I'm lucky. My father will be fit to be tied as it is."

Tommy nodded sympathetically. "Leg-shackled, eh?"

Chance frowned at his boots, buffed to a mirror-like shine by Tommy's excellent valet. "Not if I can help it."

"But I thought it was all arranged. You said if you hadn't found a wife by the end of this year, your dear old pa was going to arrange it all for you. Got a bride lined up, you said."

Chance rolled his eyes. Really, Tommy was a kind-hearted fellow and a devilish good sort, but sometimes he seemed to miss the point. "Yes, he has. She'll be there waiting to meet me."

"What's she like? Is she pretty?"

"How the deuce should I know? I never met the creature. I don't even know her name," Chance said, a little exasperated that Tommy didn't immediately understand his fury. "My father won't give two hoots if she looks like the backside of a horse, so long as her pedigree is a thing of beauty, Tom. He'd narrowed it down to a dozen candidates last time I saw him, but now he's made his choice. Not that he's told me a single thing about her, only that I need to come and introduce myself, and propose whilst I'm about it, no doubt. Why the devil do you think I've been hiding out here?"

"Oh," Tommy said, face clearing. "But why go at all, then? Mind

you, bad form, old chap. Poor girl will be sat upon thorns by now. Dreadful slight."

"Ugh," Chance exclaimed, throwing up his hands. "I know! I ought not to have stayed this long. I blame that bloody brandy you served the night before last."

"Well, I didn't exactly pour it down your throat," Tommy remarked, folding his arms.

"I know, I know, that bit was certainly my fault, but if I'd realised the magnitude of the hangover I was in for, I'd have been a bit more circumspect."

Tommy snorted and Chance had to concede the point. It wouldn't have made a blind bit of difference. Still, the fact of the matter was, he was going to be at least four days late going to meet the young lady his father was trying to make a match with. That Chance did not wish for the match did not matter a jot. His father was putting his foot down: marry, or he'd be out in the cold. Chance was angry at being manipulated and not looking forward to the inevitable confrontation. However, it wasn't the girl's fault and Tommy was right. She must be dreadfully embarrassed by his failing to arrive. It *was* a dreadful slight, and his father would murder him for it. With that happy thought in the forefront of his mind, Chase set off on his journey home.

The first day passed uneventfully. As he had plenty of time to think, Chance had the opportunity to visualise many uncomfortable versions of the reception he would receive upon arriving home. With each mile, he became increasingly gloomy and almost turned his horse around and went back to Tommy's, where his reappearance would be greeted with pleasure.

By the time he stopped for the night, Chance's fingers were blue, and he'd lost all feeling in his toes. Once he'd ensured his horse, Ransom, was tucked up snug in a cosy stable, Chance warmed himself with brandy and a good meal, and fell into bed with relief.

The next day was worse than the first. The snow that had been threatening since before he left finally arrived. At first it was flurries of tiny white dots that left no trace upon the ground, but by mid-morning big fat flakes were tumbling softly and settling over the countryside like duck down.

"I don't like this," Chance muttered to Ransom, patting the big gelding's neck. "But if I don't arrive, my life expectancy is going to diminish faster than I wish to contemplate. Ah, well, we'd best push on, old fella."

By late afternoon, the weather had closed in, the snow tumbling so thick and fast that Chance could barely see his hand in front of his face. They were already on his father's land but, bearing in mind the estate covered over thirteen thousand acres, it did not mean he was close to home. The snow already lay in thick drifts and showed no signs of stopping. Even if he wasn't chilled to the bone himself, he could not force Ransom on through this.

Turning his horse down a narrow track that was invisible to anyone who didn't know every inch of the estate in detail, Chance headed towards Corry Brook Farm. The previous tenant, old Mr Burrough, had died three months ago, and his wife had gone to live with her sister. The farm was empty now, awaiting the new tenants who were arriving in the New Year. Chance would just have to put up there for the night and hope he could get home in the morning.

"Come on, my lad," Chance said, dismounting with a curse of pain as his frozen toes hit the ground.

He guided Ransom into the stables, relieved to be out of the wind and snow. His face was burning with cold and he longed to get inside and light a fire, but he settled Ransom first, surprised and relieved to discover a good supply of hay for him. Once his horse was comfortable, Chance hurried to the farmhouse, trying to find a way in. The doors were locked and far too sturdy to force, but he found a window which was not in the best of repair and wriggled the latch open. It was an effort to squeeze himself through the small gap, but there was no way he was spending another moment out in this bloody freezing gale. With a muttered curse and a thud, Chance hit the floor, shoulder first. Well, at least he was in.

He felt bad about breaking in, though technically it was his father's property, but Mr Burrough had been a kindly fellow and Chance had often ridden out this way when he was a boy. The couple had never had children of their own, and they'd always welcomed him. Mr Burrough had taught him much about the land and farming, far more than his own father, who was far too high in the instep for such talk of manual labour. Chance had loved his visits, and Mrs Burrough never failed to send him off with a hot pie or a cake and a fond smile. It seemed wrong to be here like this, with the old man dead and his wife gone, but it wasn't theirs any longer. Sorrow sat in Chance's gut like a pebble, and he felt uncharacteristically melancholy.

"Buck up," he told himself, and got to his feet, moving through the gloom to the kitchen.

Though it was not yet evening, the world outside was a blur of

white and the house was all cast in shadow, yet the kitchen was not as icy cold as he'd expected. In fact, it was warm. Chance moved closer to the fireplace, where a fire burned low in the grate. Strange. He turned in a circle, frowning.

"Anybody there?" he called.

The house was silent.

Chance moved through the kitchen past the fireplace which separated it from the main living area.

"Is there anyone there?" he tried again, shouting up the stairs and feeling a little foolish.

Probably it was one of his father's staff come to check the place had been left in good order, though that was an insult to Mrs Burrough. The idea that she wouldn't have left everything neat as a new pin was ridiculous. Still… it seemed odd they'd lit a fire.

Uneasy now, Chance climbed the stairs, relieved to see one bed remained, though much of the furniture had gone with Mrs Burrough, who'd taken the couple's belongings with her. At least he'd have somewhere to spend the night. He checked from room to room, finding not a soul, and headed back down to the kitchen.

It was the work of a moment to get the fire blazing again, and so he stripped off his sodden coat and hung it to dry. Happily, he still had provisions in his saddle bags, so he sat down to a simple repast of apple and cheese by the fire until he'd thawed out. Belatedly, he realised he ought to have lit a fire in the bedroom as well, but it was too late now. Instead, he climbed the stairs once more, intending to haul the mattress down and put it on the floor of the kitchen.

Once upstairs, he paused in the bedroom's doorway, staring down at the floor. He'd not brought a candle, and it was almost full dark outside, but something had caught his eye. Chance bent down and picked up a small gold hairpin, turning in his hands. There was a delicate golden daisy on the end, and the craftsmanship very fine. How odd. Why hadn't he noticed it before? It was tiny but a quality piece, of greater value than anything he thought Mrs Burrough would own. Or, if she did, she'd not forget it or leave it lying on the ground. Where the devil had it come from?

Tucking it into his pocket with a frown, he searched the one remaining chest of drawers for a blanket but found nothing. Disappointed, he grabbed hold of the mattress and tugged it out of the room.

He woke in the early hours to the soft glow of the embers, and with the strong suspicion that he was not alone. Something had

disturbed his sleep. He kept very still, all his instincts on alert. His time as a soldier had taught him not to ignore his sixth sense, that sensation in his gut which told him something was amiss. A creak from upstairs had him sitting bolt upright, his gaze fixed on the ceiling. All the fine hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and he told himself not to be so bloody stupid. Mr Burrough might have died up there, but there was no reason he could think of for the old man to be haunting the place. Certainly, there was no reason for the fellow to be haunting Chance. They'd always been on very good terms… though Burrough *had* enjoyed a wicked sense of humour. Chance could just imagine the old devil laughing his socks off at having put the wind up him. Still, there were no such things as ghosts, and there had been no one up there. He'd checked. Reminding himself very sternly of this fact, Chance laid down again and went back to sleep.



Chance woke early the next morning, irritated by a chill draft whistling from under the front door. Grumbling, he got to his feet and stretched, before padding to the window and peering out. Damnation. It was still snowing hard, a fierce wind blowing flurries of white in gusts. Well, it didn't look as if he was going anywhere soon. With that in mind, he figured he'd best see if there was any food to be had. Chance built the fire back up, set a kettle of water to boil, and pulled his coat back on before heading out to check on Ransom.

Having investigated the storerooms, Chance returned to the kitchen with an armful of apples and some potatoes and carrots. There had been turnips, too, but he wasn't *that* hungry. He set the results of his foraging down on the kitchen table and went to pick up the mug he had left there. Except it wasn't there. He distinctly remembered that, last night, he had drained a mug filled with water and put it on the corner of the table. Chance stared about the room. Nothing. That strange uneasy sensation rippled over him again and he walked back to the cupboard he'd got the mug from… and there it was. Ice water cascaded down his spine. He stared at the mug in consternation.

Think, Chance, he told himself sternly.

Either he'd been mistaken, had washed the mug up and put it away—most unlikely—or someone had moved it. Now, there was perhaps a chance that he was wrong about the existence of ghosts, but the only ghost likely to be here was Mr Burroughs, and Chance could not imagine him washing up a mug and putting it away again. Which meant there was someone else here. Someone a dashed sight more particular than he was.

While he pondered this, Chance had an apple for his breakfast and

decided the potatoes and carrots would do very well for lunch, and dinner if it came to it. The idea of having to spend another whole day and night here was not a happy one, but what could he do? The narrow lanes between here and home would be impassable, and he would not risk Ransom. His father would be furious, but at least he had an excuse now. Besides, there was a mystery here, and Chance did not like mysteries.

It stood to reason that whoever was sharing this farmhouse with him had arrived before he had, and had hidden themselves. Why? Well, either because they were up to no good, or because they were afraid. If they were afraid, they had no reason to be, and Chance could put them at ease and stop this nonsense. If they were up to no good, well, it was his duty to discover it. This was his father's estate, after all. It would be his one day, and he did not like the idea of strange goings on. He considered the idea of just shouting to whoever it was that he knew they were there so they may as well come out, but that had revealed no one last night, so there was no reason to suppose it would work this time. So, he would have to set a trap.

At lunchtime he enjoyed a potato baked in the embers of the fire as he'd learned to do whilst on campaign, with a little of the remaining cheese he had melted on top. Then, leaving all the dirty dishes out on the table, he put on his coat and went outside, where he walked toward the stables. From there, he ran to the side of the farmhouse, and the window through which he'd first broken in, and did the same thing again. Heart thudding, he crept closer to the kitchen, unsurprised to hear movement within.

Well, then, it was about time he introduced himself to the resident ghost.

Chapter 2

"Wherein the discovery of a lovely intruder."



13th December 1817. Corry Brook Farm. Devon.

From his position in the doorway, Chance could not see who was invading the kitchen, but he could hear them moving about. Creeping in as quietly as possible, he moved farther into the room, to where his ghostly companion was hidden behind the pantry door.

"Good morning," he said.

There was an audible feminine squeak and the sound of something dropping to the floor. An apple rolled from out of the pantry and bumped gently against his boots.

"Thank you, I've already had one," Chance said amicably. "Might you come out now and introduce yourself?"

A moment later, a young woman peered around the door. She had an elfin face, a tumble of wild brown curls and eyes the colour of chocolate. Chance's breath snagged in his throat.

There was a long, drawn-out silence while the girl stared at him with obvious horror and Chance tried to make his brain work.

"Good morning," he said, aware that he was repeating himself, but too dazed to think of anything more sensible to say.

"*Bonjour*," she replied, still staring at him.

"You're French!" Chance exclaimed in surprise.

The girl snorted.

"*You* are English," she said, with a pretty accent and obvious contempt.

"Well, you're in England," Chance retorted. "I'm not the only one, you know."

She made a dismissive sound and rolled her eyes.

A little wrong-footed by this glorious creature, who looked at him as if he was something she'd stepped in, Chance decided he'd best discover what she was up to. Nice young ladies did not wander about the English countryside unattended. French ones must be even rarer.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"What are *you* doing 'ere?" she countered, folding her arms. "I was

here first."

"Yes, but…." Chance almost told her that he had a right to be.

The property was part of his father's estate, after all. Yet, he'd recently been on the receiving end of an enterprising young lady's scheme to get him snared in the parson's mousetrap. It was bad enough his father was trying to get him married off at every opportunity. He wasn't getting entangled by accident to some strange French woman, no matter how fetching she was.

"But I got caught in the storm and was about to freeze to death. What's your excuse?"

She shrugged, avoiding his eye. "The same."

Chance didn't believe her. Not for a moment. She'd been here long before the storm set in.

"You can come out of the pantry," he said, realising that she was still hiding behind the door and was regarding him warily. "You are quite safe. Word of honour as a gentleman."

She made a sound of disgust, and Chance was quite taken aback.

"What do you mean by that?"

Another dismissive shrug was her reply.

"Why are you so contemptuous of English gentlemen?" he asked, rattled.

"Because they 'ave no honour," she snapped.

"Now just wait a minute," Chance began, and then took a breath. Whoever this girl was, she was all alone in the middle of nowhere. There was a storm blowing outside, and she was trapped in here with a man she had no reason whatsoever to trust. "You don't trust me. I know that, and you are quite right not to, but I give you my word you need not be afraid of me. I am simply waiting out the storm. I shall be on my way as soon as I can, but… but I would be pleased to help you. I know this is not your property and that you ought not be here. You most certainly ought not be wandering about alone, so… what happened?"

"How do you know?" she asked, suspicion glinting in her dark eyes. "That it is not my property?"

Chance hesitated. He did not like the idea of the girl knowing his father was the Earl of Blackdown.

"I live near to here," he hedged. "I knew Mr and Mrs Burrough, the last tenants."

"Where are they?" she asked, a nervous edge to the question.

“Mr Burrough died a few months ago. Mrs Burrough has gone to live with her sister in Cornwall.”

“Mister Burrough died… here?” she asked, glancing anxiously at the ceiling.

Chance bit back a smile. “Yes, but don’t worry. He’s not haunting the place. There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

She snorted and muttered something that did not sound complimentary.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Of course there are ghosts,” she said, tutting at him. “How can you think otherwise?”

Chance frowned, folding his arms. “Well, I’ve never seen one.”

“’Ave you ever seen an elephant?” she demanded.

“Well… no,” he admitted.

“Ah, well, then elephants do not exist.”

“I didn’t mean….” Chance began before giving up. “Never mind blasted elephants, or ghosts for that matter. How did you come to be here? Where is your family?”

She shrugged then. “My parents are dead.”

“Oh, I’m… I’m sorry to hear that.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “I was a baby. I never knew them.”

“Was it… the revolution?” Chance asked, feeling awkward now.

The revolution was nothing to do with him, but he’d fought against the French in the war that had followed, after all. Was that why she hated Englishmen? Despite himself, he stiffened as she studied him, feeling certain she could see into his head, see all the things he had seen, and the horrors that sometimes woke him at night, sweating and gasping for breath.

“You were a soldier,” she said, confirming that he ought never play poker.

He did not wish to lie about it, so he nodded.

She considered him a moment longer. “What is your name?”

Chance let out a breath of relief, having expected this rather cross young woman with her low opinion of English men to berate him for the killing of her countrymen. Yet now he had another dilemma, if he did not wish to give away his identity.

“Charles Lascelles,” he said quickly, giving the name of a distant cousin. “At your service, Miss…?”

She pursed her lips for a long moment, looking at him, and Chance wondered if she knew he was lying.

"Odette de Bethencourt."

Chance bowed. She dipped a curtsey, and then gave a little snort of laughter at how absurd it seemed in the circumstances. Chance grinned at her.

"Well, Miss de Bethencourt—"

She sighed and shook her head. "Oh, no. There is no one here. For now, you may call me Odette, and I shall call you Charlie."

"Charles," Chance corrected with a smile.

"Well, Charlie, would you please cook me one of those potatoes you had for lunch? I am 'ungry, and it smelled very good."

Chance lifted an eyebrow at her imperious tone but then met her eyes and saw a glint of amusement there.

"Of course," he said. "If you tell me how you came to be here."

She disappeared into the pantry, where Chance had put the remaining vegetables, and returned holding a large potato, which she held out to him.

"How did *you* come to be here?" she asked politely.

Chance took the potato from her and walked to the fire. "I told you. I was on my way home for Christmas and I got caught in the storm."

"And where is home?" she pressed.

"About three miles in that direction." Chance waved vaguely to the north, though he had in fact been heading west. "Where is your home, Odette?"

She watched as he stirred up the fire and then pulled some embers to one side to cook the potato.

"*Tours*," she said, looking a little smug.

Chance sighed. "Have you ever been there?"

Her face clouded and her dark brows drew together.

"Non," she admitted. "I was born in England."

"You don't like it?" he guessed, assuming he would now hear a barrage of complaints about the weather, the food, and the awful men.

Instead, she simply shrugged, looking rather melancholy.

"I do not know it. Until a week ago I lived with my uncle, on his estate. He escaped France with my father and mother, during *la terreur*. His son, André, told me he overheard the servants talking

some years ago. They said that my parents had been prepared to leave but uncle refused to go, refused to believe he was in danger until… well, it was almost too late and he had to leave so much behind. He was—*is*—very angry. Then my parents died in a carriage accident when I was two and he raised me as his own, but I 'ave seen *no one, 'ad* no society, for he wanted me to marry his son. My *cousin*!" she said, shaking her head in horror. "He was like my brother, but then he died of scarlet fever, and so…."

She shrugged and Chance forced himself to tear his eyes away, aware he was staring. It was hard not to. The young woman was like no one he'd ever met before. Her eyes sparkled with passion and her accent, which was faint when she was calm, became ever stronger as her temper rose.

"And so…?" he pressed, certain now that she had run away from something or someone.

She shrugged again and her face shuttered up. He suspected he'd get no more from her for the time being, so he changed the subject.

"How did you find this place?"

"I had been walking for… oh, I don't know, a very long time, and I realised I was lost. Then I realised I did not want to go back anyway, but it was dreadfully cold and I thought perhaps the lady of the house might let me sit by the fire. There was no one here, yet it looked so nice and clean, and so… I broke a window," she admitted, looking guilty as she pointed towards the scullery. "Down there. I shall leave money for the repair of it, though."

Chance smiled. "I'm glad you found somewhere safe, out of the cold."

She snorted at that. "It was, until you arrived. Have you any idea how uncomfortable I was last night? You stole my bed and my fire."

"I did no such thing," he retorted. "I didn't even know you were here. If you'd only announced yourself, I should have let you have both."

"Ah, yes, that would be very sensible of me, telling a gentleman he was all alone in the house with a bed and a helpless female."

The derision in her eyes was blatant and, though Chance could not fault her logic, some devil in him could not help remark: "Somehow, I doubt very much that you have ever been helpless."

She grinned at him then, an expression that lit up her face and made Chance feel very much as if he'd been hit in the head.

"Thank you," she said. "That is a nice thing to say."

Once Chance had found his tongue again, he asked the obvious question. “So, what will you do now? I assume you’ve run away from your uncle for some reason, but you can’t stay here forever. The new tenants move in after Christmas… so I’m told… and, besides, it’s not the done thing. A woman alone? You’ll be ruined.”

Of course, she would be anyway if anyone discovered the two of them here together.

A glimmer of fear lit her eyes for a moment, but she blinked it away, her head going up and showing that edge of steel, of stubborn determination, that he was beginning to recognise.

“I am already ruined,” she said.

“Oh,” Chance replied, eyes widening.

“Bah! *Non*!”

She glared at him in outrage.

“I have been missing for two nights now. All alone… therefore I am ruined. Worthless,” she said with a bitter smile. “At least my uncle will have no further use for me. It is something.”

Fear glimmered briefly in her eyes, and Chance wasn’t so certain she meant that.

“But won’t he have kept it quiet? Perhaps no one knows,” he countered, hoping for her sake that it was true. He took in the quality of her pelisse and gown: exquisite, expensive. She was a lady from a good family, a valuable asset to sell on the marriage mart now that the cousin was no longer an option. Chance decided he hated her uncle for using her as a commodity. Why, he had no idea, for it was hardly an unusual arrangement, but… but to sell this woman who was all spirit and sharp edges to any old Tom, Dick, or Harry, just for financial or social gain…? He felt suddenly hot and moved away from the fire.

She considered his words. “He will certainly try, but we were staying with my uncle’s friends when I ran. They know, and I doubt they will be pleased with me. Perhaps they will be glad to see me ruined.”

“Some friends,” Chance said, outraged by the idea.

Odette sighed and wrapped her arms about herself. “Perhaps they will not. I am unfair. I do not know them at all. Perhaps they are not bad people. I do not know. I… I am just tired of doing what everyone tells me to do.”

Chance nodded, understanding that, but tried to lighten the mood. “Don’t ever join the army, Odette. You wouldn’t like it.”

It worked, and she laughed, a bright, merry sound that made him feel a little giddy with exhilaration. He wanted to make her laugh again, just to hear it. She shivered and Chance realised she was still standing by the door, still wary of him.

"Here, come and sit by the fire. You're frozen."

She stared at him, so Chance got up and moved away. There were no chairs, only the mattress on the floor, and Odette glanced at it dubiously, and then looked at Chance. He held out his hands.

"Word of honour. You've nothing to fear from me, I swear it on my mother's life."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Do you like your mother?"

Chance spluttered a little but managed a reply. "Yes!"

Apparently mollified, she moved to the fire, and cast him a furtive glance before arranging herself decorously on the mattress. Chance dithered, uncertain of what to do until she tsked and waved a hand at him.

"You may sit," she said, with the air of a queen commanding a lowly subject. "Over there."

She pointed at the far end of the mattress and Chance complied, sitting cross-legged. He glanced up at the window, to where the snow was still falling.

"I don't think I shall be able to leave today," he said, sounding apologetic, though in truth he was relieved. He had no desire to quit the company of this intriguing, beautiful girl. Not yet. He wanted to know more about her. "When I do go, though, would you like me to escort you somewhere? Or… Or I could take you home with me. My father…."

He paused, a little terrified to consider his father's reaction if he finally returned to meet his fiancée with a beautiful, unmarried French girl in tow. Oh, yes, that would go splendidly. Still, he could not simply abandon her. Despite her scepticism on the subject, he *was* a gentleman.

"Well, I'm sure my family would help you."

She made a derisive sound. "Your family would see me returned to my uncle with all possible haste."

Chance nodded, unable to deny it. "Probably, but what choice do you have?"

She shrugged again, such a hopeless gesture that Chance felt a weight settle in his chest. He wanted to help her, though he had no idea how.

“Do you have a… sweetheart?” he asked, wondering why his heart was skipping about so erratically. “Were you going to find him?”

Odette huffed. “*Non*! That would be most improper. Besides, did you not ’ear me? I have been kept in isolation. I have met nobody. You are the first young man I have seen in an age. My uncle’s friends are all old men. My cousin, André, sometimes brought people home from school, but they were all foolish boys. I did not like them. They would stare at me and make silly remarks. They were most vexing.”

Chance snorted, unsurprised. This young woman could turn a sensible man into a gibbering fool with ease, he didn’t doubt. He was struggling against the phenomenon himself.

“It is nice to meet someone who is polite,” she added, casting him a cautious look from under her lashes.

“Thank you,” Chance replied. “It is nice to meet you, too, though I am sorry you’re in such a fix. I shall help you if I can.”

Odette shook her head, staring into the flames. The firelight danced in her dark eyes as she gave a heavy sigh.

“You cannot. I ’ave been very stupid, I think. I thought… I thought….” She laughed, though it was far from a happy sound. “*Non*, the truth. I did not think at all, I reacted. I have an ’orrible temper and I can be impulsive. I did not mean to run away, not at first. But then I could not stop, could not make myself go back. I ran away without thinking it through, and now I have made a bad situation so very much worse. At least it is a situation of my own making, though. That is something.”

She turned and gave Chance a rueful smile.

“I’ll do anything I can to help you,” Chance promised her, hardly knowing what he was saying.

He was hypnotised by the firelight in her eyes, the soft flush of colour on her cheeks that grew darker as she heard the tenor of his voice.

She looked away at once, her posture stiffening.

“No, don’t… I shan’t touch you, Odette. I promise you’re safe. Don’t be afraid.”

He waited until she looked back at him again and smiled at her, hoping it was a reassuring expression. She held his gaze, studying his face for so long he felt self-conscious, but at last she nodded and looked away.

“I believe you.”

He prepared the potato for her and shared some of his cheese, and

by the time she had eaten her spirits seemed to have revived a little.

"I have some cards in my bag. Would you like to play?" he offered once she had cleared away her plate and cutlery.

"*Oui,*" she said eagerly. "Will you teach me, though? My uncle did not approve of gambling and would never let me learn."

Personally, Chance thought her uncle sounded like a miserable beggar, but he said nothing and dug out the cards. He spent the next half an hour teaching her how to play Vingt-Un, and the half hour that followed that trying to beat her.

"You have the luck of the devil!" he exclaimed, throwing down his cards as she beat him for the fifth time in a row.

She wagged a finger at him and tsked.

"*Non, non*, it is not luck, it is skill. I am just a better player than you," she said, her face alight with mischief.

Chance huffed at her. "Right, I'm going to teach you Piquet. We'll see how you get on with that."

Rather to Chance's chagrin, though it took her a deal longer to get the hang of it, she beat him at that too. Twice.

"Are you certain you didn't cheat?" he asked her, narrowing his eyes and sending her off into a peal of laughter.

"Oh, poor, poor, Charlie," she crowed. "He cannot beat me, so he accuses me of cheating."

Chance snorted, but couldn't deny it. "I apologise, though I can see now why your uncle kept you away from such things. If he had an inkling of your skill, he'd know you'd be damned dangerous."

Her amusement died at his words, which he immediately regretted.

"Sorry," he said.

She shook off her reaction with a wave of her hand, smiling at him again. "Perhaps I shall become a notorious gambler, then. I shall make my living from it, and men the world over will fight for the opportunity to play the infamous Odette de Bethencourt."

This statement was punctuated by an unconvincing laugh that made his heart twist with pity.

"Or perhaps you'll go back to your uncle and discover your disappearance has been kept quiet and there's been no harm done," Chance suggested.

She stilled, breathing hard, her only movement the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

"Odette?"

She looked back at him, her eyes too bright as her lip trembled.

"I don't think so, Charlie," she whispered, and a fat tear rolled down her cheek.

Chance watched in agony as she put her head in her hands and sobbed.

"Odette…. Oh, don't… don't cry," he said helplessly.

He did not know what to do and dithered until he could bear it no longer. He moved to sit beside her and put his arm about her, shocked when she turned towards him. She rested her head on his shoulder and he gave her a handkerchief to dry her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding wretched. "I know men hate it when women cry."

"Only because we don't know what to do," he said. "I want to make you feel better, but I don't know how."

She shook her head. "You've been very kind already, to teach me these games and entertain me, but it is getting dark again and now I shall have been missing for three nights. Do you really think no one will know this?"

Chance didn't reply. He didn't need to. She was obviously from a good family, a family who would have servants. No matter how loyal, servants talked, and word would get out.

"It's all right," she said, wiping her eyes and looking up at him with a tremulous smile that made his chest hurt. "My life has been so very dull until now. At least I am having an adventure and… and now I am ruined, I am free to do what I like."

Chance wished he could smile and laugh with her, and talk to her about all the adventures she might have, but all he could think of were the dangers she faced.

"You must go back to your uncle, Odette," he said, his voice firm. "I know you don't want to, but you cannot do otherwise."

She nodded, sniffing. "I know, but he will be very angry with me. I have been very stupid and wilful, and all the bad things he has always said about me are true after all. He has always said I am too much like my mother. She was wild, always causing trouble, and now, I too…."

Her voice quavered and Chance pulled her closer.

"No," he said fiercely. "I won't let him speak to you like that. I won't let him be unkind."

She made a soft sound, and he looked down to find her staring at

him in wonder.

"You are so kind," she said, a wistful sound to the words. "Charlie?"

"Yes?" Chance said, though his voice sounded a long way off. He'd fallen into those dark eyes and found himself spellbound, unable to look away. His heart was beating too fast, his skin alive with awareness, with how close she was.

"As I am ruined anyway, I… I should like it if you would kiss me. No one ever has, you see."

Chance's mouth went dry, and it was suddenly hard to breathe.

"Not even André?" he asked, remembering her cousin.

Odette shook her head, never taking her eyes from him. "No. André was lovely, a dear friend, but he never wanted to kiss me. I never wanted him to, either. He was like my brother."

"Are you sure?" Chance asked, even though a little voice in his head screamed at him to bloody well get on with it.

Odette stared at him. "*Oui,* I am sure. Just a kiss though, Charlie. Yes?"

"Just a kiss," Chance repeated, feeling a little dazed as he lowered his head to hers.

His mouth brushed hers, a barely there touch of lips that made them both suck in a breath all the same. He drew back a fraction and then did it again, and again. Had she said *one* kiss? He wondered about that as his mouth touched hers again with a delicate press of lips. This hadn't really amounted to a kiss yet, not a proper kiss, and she had not asked him to stop. Still, he did not want to be *that* man, the one who took advantage, so he pulled back, staring down at her.

"Why did you stop?" she asked, her eyes hazy. She sounded as stunned as he felt.

"One kiss, you said." The words were breathless, as though he'd run for a mile or more.

"Did I? How silly of me," she replied. "One more, please."

He did not need asking again and returned his mouth to hers, this time daring to put his hands to her waist. She swayed towards him and Chance traced his tongue over her bottom lip.

She pulled back with a gasp.

"*Oh*," she said, eyes wide.

"Sorry," Chance replied at once, cursing himself. Bloody fool. He'd had to push his luck.

“Do it again,” she demanded.

His mouth fell open. “All right,” he managed. He leaned back in and kissed her, captivated by the warm, soft lips beneath his. His tongue traced the seam of her mouth this time and she opened a little for him, her own tongue daring to touch his. The sweetness of the moment was like nothing he had ever known, and he pulled back again, not wishing to spoil it by taking too much, too soon.

“Oh,” she said on a breath of surprise, blinking at him through thick, sooty lashes.

“Oh, indeed,” Chance replied, enchanted.

She sat back but did not move away from him.

“Is there anything but potatoes to eat, Charlie? Though the potato was very good,” she added quickly, as if afraid she might offend him.

Chance laughed. “Carrots, or turnips.”

“Oh, not turnips,” she said, and he grinned at her.

“No, we shall be in dire straits indeed before we are reduced to eating turnips.”

She laughed, and the sound made him happy, made him search for something else to amuse her, just to hear that musical laughter again.

For a moment, he imagined never going home but hiding away, staying here with her. A foolish dream filled his mind of running the farm as Mr Burrough had taught him, and coming home to Odette, and… and he was losing his damn mind. He knew nothing about her beyond her name and that she had an uncle from whom she’d run away. By her own admission, she was reckless and impulsive. He was Viscount Debdon, his father was an earl, and he ought to be home by now meeting his intended bride for the first time. Chance was going to be in the basket when he got back as it was, without arriving with some ruined French girl in tow. Not that he had any option. There was no way on earth he was leaving her to fend for herself. He would see her safely to his home and find out more about her uncle. Then he might judge whether her uncle was fit to take her, for he did not like the sound of a man who would keep his niece so confined. The young lady his father had selected had likely gone off in a fury days since, after he’d been so rag-mannered as to leave her hanging. He felt rotten about it, now it was done. It was a shabby way to have treated anyone, even if he resented being manoeuvred about like a blasted chess piece.

They feasted on carrots and potatoes that night, and somehow it did feel like a feast. They ate before the fire and Chance entertained her with stories of his wartime adventures, or at least the ones that

were fit for a lady's ear and would make her laugh. In turn, she told tales of her cousin André, who had obviously been a dear friend, and whose death had been devastating to her.

"I had accepted that I must marry him," she said, pushing away her empty plate. "My uncle had told me since I was old enough to understand and so I knew it was how things would be. It made me sad that I would never fall in love, but there was a kind of security in it too. André was my friend, my brother, and I knew he would be kind, but like any girl I had hoped for a romance. You know… to go to balls and parties and fall in love. You think me foolish?"

She glanced up, a tinge of colour staining her cheeks.

Chance shook his head. "No. Not at all. Why wouldn't you want that? It's what we all want, isn't it?"

"Is it?" she asked, curious now. "Men wish for this too? I thought you avoided the parson's mousetrap like the plague?"

He laughed at that, though he could hardly deny it. "Yes. I think we take longer to come around to the idea, but… I should like to marry, to fall in love."

The words hung in the air between them and Chance could not look away from her, from those dark eyes that seemed to sparkle like a night sky in the dim firelight.

"Have you never?" she asked.

Chance shook his head.

"No. I thought I had, once, a long time ago. I thought I was mad in love, and that she loved me, but then she went and married a duke. He was fat and old, but he was a duke, and so she turned her back on me. I thought I'd die of misery," he said with a soft laugh, wondering why on earth he'd told her that. He'd never spoken of it to anyone.

His friends had known of course, which only made him feel a blasted fool.

"I am so sorry." Odette reached out and took his hand, and Chance's breath hitched, though whether it was from the soft sincerity of her words or the touch of her hand he did not know. "She was a fool."

He laughed again at her tart remark, touched and surprised at her anger on his behalf.

"How can you say so? You don't know me at all, and *he* was a duke."

"*Bah*!" she said in disgust. "I know you. I know enough to see an honourable man. I am sorry, too, for being so rude to you at first, but I

did not know you then. I think you are kind, Charlie. I think you like to take care of people, for you have taken care of me."

Chance gave her a crooked smile. "I only baked you a potato."

"Two potatoes," she corrected, wagging a finger at him. "But it is not that. You have reassured me that I am safe. Over and over, you have promised to 'elp me, though I am certain I shall bring you trouble. You give me the seat closest to the fire, and your coat to keep me warm, and you only took one kiss and did not even try to ask for more."

"I wanted to," Chance said, and then snapped his mouth shut, wishing he'd not said so.

He did not wish to make her nervous, or for her to change her mind about him, but she only smiled.

"I know," she said, lowering her lashes, her voice very quiet. "I wanted to as well, but… it is a dangerous game. We both know it, and so you stopped."

His entire body prickled with awareness at her words, at knowing she felt it too, this pull of attraction, but he nodded, knowing she was correct. "Yes."

Chance watched the way her eyelids drooped with fatigue. She couldn't have slept much last night, cold and afraid and uncomfortable upstairs. He felt a brute for that, though he had not known she was there.

"You're tired," he said. "Go to sleep. I shan't bother you."

"What about you?" She looked around the room, as though a chair or another bed might present itself. "There's nowhere to get comfortable."

"The floor," he said with a shrug. "I was a soldier. I've slept on worse, I assure you."

She stared at him for a long moment and shook her head.

"No. It is silly. We share the same room, we may as well share the mattress. It is big enough and… I trust you, Charlie. I cannot be any more ruined than I am," she added with a smile, though it was the kind of smile that made his heart hurt. She trusted *Charlie*, a man who didn't exist for he had lied and given her a false name.

Chance nodded, unable to say a thing but watched as she lay down. He pulled his greatcoat up over her and she smiled her thanks. Once she was settled, Chance lay down beside her, careful to keep a space between them. Within a very short time, he heard her breathing change and could not resist the urge to sit up again and look down at

her. The firelight gilded her face and hair, shimmering bronze on her thick, dark curls. They had come loose, many of the pins having fallen away, and Chance remembered the pretty daisy pin in his pocket. He must remember to give it back to her. Her eyelids fluttered, those sooty lashes so black, fanned against her fair skin. Despite himself, his gaze fell to her mouth. He had kissed her. All at once the sweetness of that kiss returned to him full force, and he lay down once more, shaken all over again by the memory.

Go to sleep, he told himself firmly, and closed his eyes.

Chapter 3

"Wherein Chance encounters temptation enough to try a saint."



14th December 1817. Corry Brook Farm. Devon.

Chance woke, vaguely conscious of the fact that his nose felt like ice, his feet too, but the rest of him was rather toasty. Still foggy with sleep, he gradually became aware of his surroundings, remembering the snowstorm and the empty farmhouse and… *Odette*. Though the storm outside battered against the glass and howled softly about the courtyard, in his dreamy state it sounded almost melodic and soothing. Contentment suffused him and he sighed. His drowsy brain conjured her beautiful face, the feel of her mouth beneath his, and his body woke fully before the rest of him, primed and eager for more.

Then he realised why he was so warm.

At once he was wide awake, and too aware of the soft body pressed against his.

Oh.

Oh, this… this was bad. Very, very good… but *bad*.

Desire lanced through him as he realised her hand rested on his belly, so close to his straining cock his chest locked down tight with anticipation. Her breathing was still deep and steady, and she was quite obviously asleep. She must have felt the cold during the night and gravitated towards his heat, coiling around him like a climbing rose around an arbour. One leg hooked over his and he could feel the intimate heat of her body burning against his thigh. The knowledge that only a few layers of material kept her skin separated from his was torture of the worst kind.

Think boring thoughts, he counselled himself, which was patently impossible. His thoughts had taken themselves gleefully on a wild rampage and were not the least bit boring. Her breath fluttered against his neck, warm and tantalising, and his own breathing became increasingly laboured. She stirred, sighing in her sleep, and her hand shifted a fraction closer to his shaft.

Oh, Holy God and all his angels.

Chance didn't move so much as an eyelash. He was rigid with tension, his body singing with desire, and he did not know what to do.

He did nothing. If he moved, he'd wake her, and she might be afraid… horrified….

"Good morning."

Chance leapt out of his skin at the sleepy words, murmured against his ear.

"Morning," he managed, his reply harsh and raspy.

She let out a long, decadent sigh which rolled across his skin and made goosebumps erupt all over him. Then she stilled. Chance realised she had suddenly become as aware as he of their position.

At some point he had squeezed his eyes shut, no doubt to block out the inevitable scene that was about to erupt. Except that there was no scene, no shrieks of shock or disgust. He felt movement beside him and he dared to open his eyes again. Odette had pushed herself up on her elbow, her hand still burning a brand over his belly and creating far too much excitement farther south. She stared down the length of his body. His difficulty was blatant, tenting his breeches in lascivious invitation. *Oh, bloody hell*. Chance swallowed. Hard.

Her head turned, and she looked back down at him, cheeks flushed, her eyes impossibly dark. Oh, God. She wanted him. He could feel it rolling off her in waves and his skin ached, literally hurt with the need to touch her, to have her touch him. He didn't move, knowing he could not.

Odette swallowed audibly, snatched her hand back, and then rolled away from him. She stood, brushing down her skirts, and then moved towards the fire, using the poker to stir the dying embers back to life with rather more force than was warranted.

Chance let out a long, slow breath, before forcing his unwilling limbs to move.

"I'll… I'll fetch some more firewood," he said gruffly, and practically ran for the door.

Though he felt like a horny schoolboy, he dealt with his unmanageable body behind one of the sheds. It barely helped. Even the snowstorm that blew icy blasts at his face and the drifts that were up to his knees did little to cool his ardour, for he knew the moment he returned to the farmhouse, she'd be there, alone. The temptation to flirt and seduce had been bad enough last night, but now… after having seen the look in her eyes. *Oh, hell*. Yet she trusted him, she thought him a good man, and he was damn well going to prove her right. She had been ill-used enough by her uncle, from what he could tell. Where she had learned her disgust of Englishmen he did not know, for she said she'd met no young men outside of him and her

cousin, but he would not disgrace himself or his countrymen by acting like a bloody libertine. He'd been a bit of devil during his lifetime, but he was no rakehell, he was a gentleman… or, at least, he knew *how* to be a gentleman when the need arose. The need had most definitely arisen.

Still requiring a bit of time to clear his head, he walked around to what had been the kitchen garden, to see if there was anything worth eating beneath the snow. After hunting about a bit, he found a basket with a broken handle and filled it with Brussels sprouts, a few parsnips, and some more carrots. Then he went to the potting shed and uncovered some string. It was easy enough to find the paths rabbits took in and out of the garden in the snow, and so he fashioned a simple snare and hoped they'd get lucky. Though it had stopped snowing, it showed no signs of melting and every sign of falling again at any moment. Chance refused to admit this pleased him, or that he did not want the weather to clear. For if it did, they must leave, he would have to return her to the real world where trouble awaited her, and him too. It was hardly an inviting prospect.

With the basket of vegetables tucked under one arm and a few logs beneath the other, he headed back to the farmhouse. He was bloody freezing now, having rushed out without his greatcoat and he pushed through the door, back into the kitchen, stamping snow from his boots.

"Oh, goodness, you are all wet." Odette fussed about him, brushing snow from his hair and shoulders. "Come to the fire. I have boiled some water, but I found no tea or coffee. A pity there is no honey, either."

"Hives are over that way," Chance said through chattering teeth, remembering helping Mrs Burroughs collect the honey as a lad. "I'll go and look."

"*Non*, not now, you won't. You'll catch your death. Look at your lovely boots, they are soaked. Take them off."

Chance submitted as he was wrestled out of his sodden boots and forced to peel off the equally wet stockings beneath. Odette built the fire back up, hung his stockings to dry, and put his boots beside the hearth.

"What I wouldn't give for a bowl of porridge and a cup of chocolate," she said with a sigh. "Though you have done very well to bring back such treasure."

This was added with a grave expression that made Chance smile. Clearly, she did not wish for him to feel his efforts were unappreciated.

“Bacon,” he said wistfully. “Bacon and eggs and some good bread spread with butter.”

“Oh, stop!” she said, clutching at her belly and laughing. “That’s just cruel.”

“When we get to my home, I shall fatten you up with bacon and eggs, and bread and butter, and cake and chocolate, and porridge too, if you like. Anything the lady wishes.”

“I shall grow as fat as the Prince Regent if I eat all that,” she said, turning back to the kitchen and opening a cupboard to look inside. She pulled out a jar and removed the top, peering inside. “Besides, I am no longer a lady, am I? I do not think I shall be welcomed by your family now. Perhaps once, but….”

“Nonsense,” Chance said, though he knew it was true. “I shan’t hear it. Nothing has changed, you are still a lady. Though… won’t you tell me why you ran away? What prompted you to do such a thing?”

“Bacon fat!” she exclaimed.

“I beg your pardon?” Chance said, perplexed.

Odette turned around, holding a jar aloft.

“*Voila!* It is bacon fat,” she said, eyes bright with satisfaction. “Now we can have *pommes de terres sauté*.”

“Oh.” Chance let out a breath of laughter.

“I wonder if there are any herbs left under the snow,” she mused. “They would be very good fried with herbs.”

“I’ll look,” he said, reaching for his stockings.

“They are still all wet,” Odette protested. “I can go.”

Chance shook his head, already pulling on his boots. “You prepare the potatoes, and I shall find the herbs and some honey, and then we shall eat like kings.”

Without really thinking about what he was doing, he stood up and went to her, then planted a kiss on her nose before he grabbed his coat and headed back outside.

Not too much later, they were sitting by the fire, the scent of bacon lingering in the air. The potatoes were crisp and golden and flavoured with rosemary, and she had cooked the carrots in the honey with some thyme.

“My word, Odette, I think this is the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten,” Chance said, shaking his head. He speared the last potato slice and chewed with satisfaction.

“I’m sure it can’t be, really,” Odette replied, though pleasure shone

in her eyes at his words. “It is just our circumstances but… it is good. *C'est délicieux*.”

“You’re delicious,” he said, the words out before he could think better of them.

Still, he found he did not regret saying them. The blush that tinged her cheeks was adorable.

He got up and cleared their plates away.

“Well, that was a breakfast fit for a king, but sadly this monarch must see to his own horse. Poor Ransom will think he’d been forgotten.”

“I’ll come,” she offered at once.

“Oh, there’s no need to go out in the cold. I can manage.”

But she was already putting on her half boots.

“I want to,” she said. Odette looked up at him through her lashes and let out a breath of laughter. “I need some fresh air and exercise after all those potatoes. Besides, the wind has calmed, and it has stopped snowing now.”

The sound of her happiness, light and musical, rioted through him and Chance wondered at how it made him feel. If he was honest, he had avoided nice girls. Nice girls were a serious undertaking. They meant marriage and responsibility and settling down. When he’d come back from the war, he’d been incapable of taking anything seriously. He’d point blank refused. He’d experienced too many years of seriousness, of life-and-death gravity, and it had taken its toll.

For the last year and a half he’d lived for pleasure, for laughter, as though he could have enough fun to compensate for the poor devils who’d been killed out there and would have none ever again. Nonsense, of course, but it had made a kind of sense to him at the time. He’d parted ways with his mistress recently, after having made rather a fool of himself and calling out Aubrey Russell. Pistols at dawn. Blasted idiot. Chance had believed Aubrey had been seeing Dolly ‘The Dasher’ Dashton behind his back. Not true, as it turned out. Thankfully, they’d called the duel off and got drunk together instead. Aubrey was a good fellow. Decent. He’d been head over ears in love with Lady Violette Greyston and not at all interested in Mrs Dashton. He’d heard Aubrey had married Lady Violette last month, and Chance had felt oddly envious, despite not wanting to get married, because of all the *fun* he’d been having. Hmmm.

“What is it?”

Chance looked around to see Odette studying him, and realised

he'd been frowning out of the window.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "Wool gathering. Come along, then. I'll introduce you to Ransom. Though I must warn you, he's the most terrible flirt."

Odette laughed and followed him outside and along to the stables.

"You're right, he is shameless," she admitted not much later, as Ransom pushed his soft muzzle towards her again, seeking more caresses.

She had taken off her glove to scratch the big fellow behind his ears and Ransom closed his eyes, whickering softly. Chance could hardly blame him. If Odette touched him, he'd be in the same daft state.

He could not help but watch her, crooning to Ransom now in French, the words sliding over Chance's skin as he imagined her speaking so to him. God, she was lovely. Her hair was a tangled mess of dark curls, her clothes were rumpled, and she had a smudge of soot on her cheek from where she'd been attending the fire, but she was heart-stopping.

She looked up then, meeting his eyes as she caught him staring at her. His heart thudded quicker when she did not look away.

"We'd best leave Ransom to his breakfast," he managed, too aware of the danger inherent in the situation, and not having enough faith in his own willpower to dare test it any further.

The desire to kiss her was a burn beneath his skin, making him hot and restless, and he felt certain she would not rebuff him if he ventured to ask. They went back out into the snow and Chance realised they would have to go back into the house and sit on the mattress by the fire. There was nothing to entertain them but a pack of cards, and….

Panic-struck, he scooped up a handful of snow and lobbed it at her. It hit the back of her bonnet, setting it all askew. She turned around so quickly that she overbalanced, slipped, and fell on her backside.

"Ooof!" she exclaimed as she hit the ground.

Chance bit his lip, wondering if she'd be furious with him. Odette stared in outrage for a moment. He'd been about to offer to help her up when she gathered up a handful of snow and flung it back at him.

She was surprisingly accurate, and it hit him square in the face. The sudden shock of cold was certainly invigorating, and dispelled the aching desire that had been tormenting him, but then she ruined it by

laughing. She laughed and laughed, delighted with herself, and Chance could only grin at her, sitting in the snow, her bonnet all lopsided, and damn near hysterical. She was marvellous.

Abruptly, her laughter subsided, and she scrambled up, gathering more snow.

Chance dodged just as a second snowball whistled past his ear. Well, all right.

He began throwing them back as she shrieked and ran about, and Chance congratulated himself when one of his shots exploded against her lovely backside whilst she'd bent to gather more snow. She straightened with a yelp and glared at him.

He shrugged.

"If you will present such a delicious target," he said, chuckling.

From then on, it was war.

Snowballs flew back and forth across the yard with more speed and enthusiasm than accuracy, though some of them hit home. He very nearly knocked her bonnet off and naturally she retaliated at once. Chance exclaimed as she got him on the back of his neck and trickles of ice water and snow slid down between his shoulders, making him shiver and grimace.

"You little devil," he hollered and ran after her.

Odette shrieked and picked up her skirts, running awkwardly through the thick snow as the heavy material of her dress hampered her. Inevitably, she went down, face first.

"Got you!" Chance declared, triumphant and not the least bit chivalrous as he grabbed her about the waist and hauled her up. She turned in his arms, her face wet with snow, her nose and cheeks red from the cold, and her eyes… her eyes were full of laughter and sparkle, and something squeezed in his chest.

"Oh, Charlie… that was such fun," she said, still breathless. "I had forgotten what it was like to laugh, and—"

Whatever she had meant to say was forgotten as she caught the look in his eyes. She stilled, and Chance knew she was waiting for him to kiss her. He wanted to oblige, wanted to pull her close, but….

"Let's build a snowman," he said, improvising wildly.

Anything to break the tension. For, if he did not, he would kiss her, and he did not think it would end there. Under no circumstances would he dishonour this beautiful, wonderful girl. She deserved better than that.

He did not wait to see her reaction, did not dare. It took every

ounce of will power to turn and walk away from her, and he busied himself with gathering snow. She joined him a few minutes later, and they worked side by side in silence for a while.

"Do you 'ave brothers and sisters?" she asked him.

Chance nodded, relieved she wasn't cross with him, and glad for the opportunity to talk about something safe.

"Yes, five sisters. All married," he added with a smile. "And three nieces so far. My poor father…."

He stopped, realising he could not tell her how anxious his father had become about the title. He'd been utterly furious with Chance for going away to war when there was no heir to take his place. Well, there *was* an heir: his cousin Humphrey, who made Chance look like a choir boy. If Chance died without a male heir and the title went to Humphrey, he had no doubt whatsoever that his father would make his afterlife a misery.

"Ah, surrounded by women," Odette said with a laugh, watching as he hefted the snowman's head onto the body. "He must have been so glad to see you return safe from the war."

"Yes. He was." It had been the only time he'd ever seen his father weep. He'd been so certain Chance would not come back. Of course he wasn't entirely sure if the man had wept with relief that his heir was in one piece or because his son had returned, but still. It had been nice to be in his good books for once. It hadn't lasted long.

"It must be wonderful to have family," she said, packing snow around their creation's neck to keep his head on. "My uncle's home is remote, in Derbyshire. There was only him and André, and a few servants. He lost so much during the war, it changed him, made him bitter. He is so proud, you see, and to have lost so much money, so much power…. He feels he cannot hold his head up in society, not unless—"

She stopped abruptly and brushed the snow from her gloves. Chance wondered just who her uncle was and what she'd been about to say, but then she flashed him a dazzling smile, and all the sense was knocked out of his brain.

"There, *il est très beau*."

"As handsome as me?" Chance asked, before he could stop himself.

That awful, delicious tension rose between them again, tantalising, daring him.

Odette shook her head.

"*Non*," she said softly. "Not as handsome as you."

She moved towards him and reached for his lapels, steadying herself as she lifted onto her toes and pressed her mouth to his.

Oh, that's torn it, he thought wildly, and pulled her into his arms.

Chapter 4

"Wherein a rash decision."



14th December 1817. Corry Brook Farm. Devon.

Odette de Bethencourt was not a wicked girl. At least, she'd never thought so before. Perhaps it was only that she'd had no opportunity to be wicked, though. When one was all but buried alive in the depths of the countryside with no society, opportunities for bad behaviour were rather scarce. Yet her uncle had always muttered darkly about how she favoured her tempestuous mother, and now perhaps his foreboding was proved well–founded, for the moment Odette had been given the merest sniff of freedom, she'd run away. That she had not intended to do it until she was too lost to find her way home hardly mattered. Now she had put herself entirely beyond the bounds of good behaviour, and kissed a man she barely knew. It was a little strange to discover herself capable of such wild behaviour after so many years of assuming she was a nice young lady despite her uncle's mutterings.

Ah, well. Fate was a funny thing.

If not for her uncle's determination to marry her to some fellow she'd never heard of in her life before, she would not be here. His son's death had hardened him from a merely, proud and unbending man into one that rather frightened her. He had pinned all his hopes on his grand plan of André marrying her and getting his hands on her fortune, which was rather a large one. Sadly for him, she could not inherit before the age of one and twenty and only then if she married. André had died six months before her twenty-first birthday, and her uncle's hopes had been crushed to dust. Not to be thwarted, he had come about and decided she could best serve the family honour by marrying a titled man and reviving their fortunes.

He'd struck a deal with the Earl of Blackdown and had blithely informed her she would marry his son, Viscount Debdon. She had argued and pleaded, but to no avail. She would have no come out, no chance at society before she married. It was a *fait accompli*. Odette had hated Viscount Debdon on principle from that moment on, for what kind of man would marry a woman he had never seen or met simply to get his hands on her fortune? After all, what other reason could he have for agreeing to the match? When the devil hadn't even bothered to turn up to meet her, well… she had gone a little mad. Yet even

though she was terrified for the future, in this moment she could not regret her madness.

Charlie's lips were soft and sweet, and the way he held her, as if she was precious, made her want to cling to him for dear life. Emotion rose within her chest and she scolded herself for being so foolish. He was just a man and men, as André had warned her, would act the lover and then cast her aside if she didn't take care. Thoughts of her cousin, her dearest friend, tinged her longing with sadness and Charlie pulled back, regarding her with concern, aware of the change in her mood.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I… I got carried away. Forgive me."

Odette shook her head, not wanting him to believe she regretted the kiss. She reached up, touching a hand to his unshaven jaw, intrigued by the feel of it under her fingers.

"*Non,* it is not you. Not…." She took a breath, gathering herself. "I liked the kiss, very much. It is only that… I am afraid. I wish I could stay here in this little dream. It is like a world outside of the world, but that is an illusion. I wish my cousin were alive still, then at least I should not be all alone."

Odette swallowed down a sob, determined not to be some awful weepy female of the kind one read about in Gothic novels, forever wailing and swooning.

"You're not alone. I'm here," Charlie said, his expression so grave and anxious that not dissolving into tears was harder than ever.

"I know, and I am so grateful to you. I shall never forget you, Charlie, nor your kindness."

He stepped back, frowning at her, his dark brows drawn together. "Forget me?"

She forced her mouth into a smile that felt frail and too obviously false. "Have you not understood, Charlie? We cannot stay here. The snow will melt, and it will be time for us to leave. I will return to my uncle, and you to your family, and we shall not see each other again."

The sob tried once again to escape and so she ran before she made a scene. She covered her mouth with her hand, forcing the misery to remain inside as she turned and fled back to the house.

Chance watched her go, an odd sensation settling heavily in his chest.

Never see her again?

Well, of course he wouldn't. He had his life, she had hers. She was

ruined. Her uncle would take her away and bury her back in the countryside, or perhaps he'd cast her out into the world, alone. Chance was Viscount Debdon, and would one day be the Earl of Blackdown, he couldn't go about marrying just anyone. *Marrying?* Who'd said anything about marrying?

He had.

Chance moved towards an old mounting block left out in the yard, brushed the snow off the top, and sat down with a thud.

He felt a bit giddy.

Odette was… oh, Lord, she was beautiful and funny and vivacious, and… and he barely knew her. Yet the thought of her shut up in some gloomy house with her wretched uncle, or, worse still, alone in the world with no one to protect her, was untenable. Panic rose inside him with such force he could hardly breathe. No. No, he would not let that happen. He would protect her.

Chance let out a breath of laughter. Protect her? When he returned home with her and it became clear that they'd spent several days and nights alone together, she'd be done for. The only way he could protect her was to marry her. He waited for the panic he was experiencing to worsen, to rampage out of control, and was shaken to discover it dissipated instead. All his old apprehensions, his terror of being hemmed in and of his wings being clipped… they weren't there. He puzzled over this for a time, wondering why. What had changed? What was this sensation? It took him a while, but eventually he had it figured out. Relief. It was a relief, but it was more than that, it was illuminated with excitement and hope. He'd seen so much he wanted to consign to some dark place he need not think of, had lost so many friends, that he'd forgotten what it was to think of the future and to hope, to dream. *Out of practise,* he told himself. That was all. He tried to imagine a future where Odette was his wife. He imagined her laughter and her strength, her courage, for she had not run away from him when he'd discovered her here. She was no shrinking violet. Odette had stood her ground and spoken to him with all the contempt she had felt. He still did not know why that was, he realised. There was a great deal he did not know, but he would. She would tell him because she trusted him, at least a little. So he would do his best to know her better, to increase her trust in him… and then he would ask her to marry him.



By the time Charlie returned to the house, Odette had resumed a tolerable measure of calm. She had put some water on to boil, intending to rinse the dishes and to have a much-needed wash herself.

“You need a shave,” she said, trying her best to sound light-hearted as he came in. “You’re all bristly and prickly.”

He rubbed a hand over his face and gave a rueful smile. “I’ll fetch my shaving kit.”

Odette poured some hot water out into a basin for him as he sat down at the table and set down a small leather case which contained his razor and shaving brush. He looked up at her and flashed a grin.

“And look what I have. I have a feeling you’d sell your soul to get your hands on this.”

He held up a small round of soap, and Odette let out a gasp.

“Oh! Charlie, yes, please. I don’t suppose you have any tooth powder in there too?”

She watched with anticipation as he drew a small pot from a pocket and brandished it like a magician revealing a trick. There was a devilish look in his eyes.

“A solider is always prepared for any eventuality. What’s it worth?” he asked her. “What reward shall I have for such riches?”

Odette blushed, a tremor of unease sliding down her back and, for just a moment, she wondered if she had misjudged him. His face fell at once and he shook his head.

“No! No, not… I didn’t mean….” He huffed, looking a little indignant. “I would never ask such a thing of you.”

Odette was contrite at once, hating that she’d even thought it of him. “Forgive me.”

He smiled then, and the curve of his lips transformed his face and made her feel all dithery and foolish. She had noticed his expression was often quite stern, forbidding almost, but it took little to make him smile, to brighten his blue eyes.

“No, my fault. I was only teasing. As if you’d even consider such a thing for a paltry bar of soap and a bit of tooth powder,” he said with a laugh.

Odette looked down at her crumpled clothes and gave a sniff.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said doubtfully, for the express purpose of making him laugh.

It worked and a little surge of triumph rushed through her. She liked making him laugh, loved the way she could make his eyes sparkle. Odette had the strong suspicion this was a man who had been full of laughter and fun once upon a time, but life—the war—had knocked it out of him. She sensed he was learning it all over again, and she wanted so much to help him.

“Well, it’s yours,” he said, grinning. “I shall shave and get out of your way for a bit, and you can wash in front of the fire. How’s that?”

“Such a gentleman,” she said, affecting a swoon.

“Glad you noticed,” he said seriously, and then winked at her as he lathered up the brush with the soap and applied it to his neck and chin.

He’d taken off his cravat to do so, and the scene was so domestic and intimate Odette did not know where to put herself. Yet, it was fascinating too, and so she decided a girl who was ruined could act as she pleased, and sat down at the table to watch.

Chance was quiet until he’d applied the soap all over and reached for the razor. He’d propped a small looking glass on the table at an angle and tilted his head to get a view.

“Why do you have such a poor opinion of Englishmen?” he asked conversationally, before using the razor.

Somehow, Odette knew that her answer was important to him and, for that reason, she did not rush to answer him. She did not know this man, and was not even certain he’d told her the truth of who he was. There had been something in his eyes when he’d given his name, as if he was hiding something. Well, she was, so why not? He was obviously a gentleman. Despite being soaked through and crumpled when they’d first met, she knew his clothes were quality, and his accent was refined. She wondered if he would offer to make her his mistress. For all he had been careful with her, determined to treat her with respect, the reality of their situation would hit home eventually. She was ruined. He owed her nothing and well as he might like her, she could hardly expect him to propose to a woman who’d acted as rashly as she had. It was not the action of a sensible woman, of the kind of woman a fellow might wish to marry. A mistress, though, that was different. Perhaps, if he knew she had money, he would be tempted to offer for her? The idea made her flush hot. No. She would not be sold to him. Not to him. She liked him too much. Far, far too much. It would kill her not to know if he truly cared for her, or had married her for her fortune.

So, she would tell him, but… not that bit.

She took a breath and then stopped as he laid a finger to her lips. He was half-soap, half–shaved, and looked a little comical, but his eyes were soft and serious.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “It doesn’t matter, and you don’t need to tell me until you are ready.”

“I was going to—” she protested, but he shook his head.

"Marry me."

Odette gaped at him. Surely, she had misheard… he couldn't… he hadn't…!

"Marry me, Odette," he said again, his voice firm this time. "I cannot bear the idea of you going away and never seeing you again. I was going to wait, to discover more about you, for I know you are hiding something, but… I don't care. The more I think about never seeing you again, the more afraid I feel. I can't bear it, so… marry me?"

She stared at him, unable to believe he'd really asked her, but there he was, waiting for her answer, his expression tight with anxiety.

"*Oui*," she whispered, so quietly she wondered if he had heard until his mouth stretched into a wide smile.

He gave a little whoop and laughed.

"Splendid! That's… That's marvellous," he said, his eyes dancing. "Damn, I want to kiss you now, and…."

He muttered a curse as he realised he was all soapy, and Odette dissolved into giggles.

"Oh, Charlie, you are so funny!"

"Just you wait there. Don't move," he commanded, so sternly that she only laughed all the harder.

He returned to the job at hand, making swift work of shaving himself and somehow not cutting himself to ribbons. He flung the razor onto the table, wiped his face over with his sleeve to rid himself of the last bits of soap, and turned back to her. She watched as he reached out and took her hands in his.

"Say it again, darling," he said.

"*Oui,* Charlie," she said. "I will marry you."

Guilt flared in his eyes for a moment. "Odette, my name—"

"I know." She smiled at him. "Tell me later."

He nodded with relief and leaned in for a kiss. It was a chaste kiss, a gentle press of his lips, yet when he pulled back Odette was aflame and giddy with astonishment. He had asked her to marry him. He had no idea who she was and must believe she had nothing. Fate had brought her here, to this place, to Charlie, she would trust in that. She would trust in anything over her uncle.

"Charlie, would you go away now, please?"

His eyebrows went up, and he looked a little hurt, so she put her

hand on his sleeve.

“A girl does not like to be such a mess when a fellow proposes to her,” she said, blushing a little. “Let me borrow your soap and tooth powder, and then I shall feel more like your fiancée and less like a chimney sweep.”

“You’d send me out into the snow when I want to kiss you?” he said sadly. “Ah, I see how this marriage will be. A cruel wife I have chosen for myself.”

“Oh, no,” she said at once, mortified even though she knew he was teasing, but he only laughed and leaned in, kissing her nose.

“Silly goose,” he said affectionately. “I’ll go and tell Ransom the good news. Call me when you’re done.”

Chapter 5

"Wherein the truth will out."



14th December 1817. Corry Brook Farm. Devon.

"Good lord, Ransom. You'll never guess what I've done," Chance told his horse. He held out a piece of the apple he'd brought with him and watched as the big fellow crunched contentedly. "I've gone and got myself a wife."

Even he could hear the wonder in his words. He kept waiting for panic to seize him, for good sense to wake him out of this little daydream and scream at him for being such a fool. It never happened, and the longer the sense of having done the right thing persisted, the more he believed it. Obviously, it was an unusual way to meets one's wife but… well, why not? Fate had brought them together for a reason, and he wasn't about to turn his back on it. Fate had been cruel to him on occasion, but it had blessed him a time or two as well, such as the bullet that had left a hole in his hat when he'd not so much as a scratch on him.

This was a blessing too. He felt it in his bones. He was sure of Odette for no good reason other than that he saw sincerity in her eyes, and her laughter made him feel alive after so long spent in some in-between state where nothing could touch him.

"Oh, my father is going to cut me into tiny pieces and scatter them all over his thirteen thousand acres. Ah, well."

He scratched Ransom's neck and frowned as he remembered the girl he'd been supposed to meet, the one to whom his father expected him to propose. An apology was due to her. Please god, don't let her still be waiting for him when he came back with a wife in tow! At least he had an excuse beyond sheer bloody mindedness, that was something. Perhaps she'd think it romantic. It *was* romantic! He grinned, feeling silly and happy and not even caring in this moment that his father was going to murder him.

"Charlie!"

Odette's voice rang out and Chance gave Ransom an affectionate kiss on the nose. "I'm a lucky dog, Ransom, old boy."

He hurried back to the farmhouse, realising as he went that everything was dripping. The snowman they had made looking oddly

drunk now, the head having slumped to one side. The snow was melting. Perhaps tomorrow they could leave? For the sheer joy of it he made a snowball and lobbed it at the snowman. It hit the side of its head, straightening it up a touch. Chance gave a bark of laughter and ran to the kitchen door.

Odette was waiting for him. She'd brushed her hair out as best she could and pinned it up again, and Chance felt his heart give an odd little kick in his chest.

"I have something of yours," he said, reaching into his pocket and retrieving the pin he'd found. He moved closer, showing her what he held. "I found it that first night. You almost had me believing in ghosts, you know."

"Oh," she said, taking it from him. "Thank you! André gave me them for my birthday. My last gift from him. They are very precious."

"You loved him," Chance observed, uncertain how he felt about that.

She slid the pin carefully into place and nodded, looking up at him. "*Oui, bien sûr*. I loved him dearly, but not romantically. It wasn't like that between us."

Chance nodded and took her hands. "I believe you. It's just so hard to believe any man could be close to you and not tumble head over ears in love."

The tinge of colour that stained her cheeks was lovely and made him want to kiss her, but she was talking of her past and he wanted to hear that too.

"André wasn't… he didn't…. I was not his… type," she finished, giving him an anxious glance.

There was an edge to her anxiety that made him realise she was telling him something significant.

"Oh," Chance said as the penny dropped. André would not have loved any girl, no matter how beautiful. "Oh, I see."

"You won't say anything? Not to anyone?" she said, grasping his hands tightly, the panic in her eyes startling him. "I could not bear anyone to say anything bad of him, and I know they would. Uncle certainly did, and he only suspected."

"No!" Chance said at once. "No, I never would. It's no one's business who a fellow loves. Takes all sorts. Never have seen what all the fuss was about. Goodness, that sort of thing is rife at school, and then everyone acts as though it never happens."

She let out a breath, staring at him in wonder.

“What?” he said, a little taken aback by her expression.

“You,” she said simply. “I keep thinking you can’t possibly be as kind and wonderful as you appear, but… but you are, aren’t you?”

It was Chance’s turn to blush, much to his astonishment. He could not remember having done so since he was about thirteen. It was an unsettling experience.

“I don’t know about that,” he muttered, aware he had not told her some very pertinent information about who and what he was, but she had agreed to marry him all the same.

Odette had no idea if he was a duke or a pauper. She thought he was *wonderful*.

“I do,” she said, moving closer to him. She slid her arms about his waist and rested her head on his chest. Tentatively, Chance put his arms around her and sighed. Perfect.

This felt—*she was*—utterly perfect.

“Tell me why you ran away,” Chance said. “If we are to be married, you must trust me. Tell me why you hate Englishmen and why you ran away, and I shall tell you my secrets, too.”

She looked up at him, studying his face for a moment before she nodded.

“*D’accord*,” she said. “I will.”

Chance led her to the mattress, stoked the fire, and then they sat down side by side and he waited for her to speak.

Odette’s heart was beating hard and fast. She was uncertain why, for nothing she would say should make him think any worse of her. He knew the worst already. What he didn’t know was just who she was, or, more to the point, who her uncle was.

“I do not know where to begin,” she said, smoothing her skirts over her knees.

“Wherever you think best. You said you were staying with your uncle’s friends, yes?”

She nodded. “Oui. My uncle, he is Guy André Félix, Marquis de Layon, or at least he was.”

Chance stared at her, his mouth a little open. She could only hope the title did not intimidate him. He was clearly a gentleman, but who knew if he had simply learned how to act the part from fellows in the army, or if he was born to such a world? Not that she cared, but… but if he was afraid of her uncle…. She swallowed down a wave of

nausea, unable to blame him if he was. Most people were.

"It is difficult for a man who had such absolute power, such vast wealth, to have been brought so low by the war. We are by no means penniless, but the comparison, you see…." She shrugged. "He is no longer the man he was, and this has made him bitter and angry. It worsened when André died, his only heir, and now his niece has ruined herself."

"No," Chance said, taking her hands. "We will go to Exeter, to the cathedral, and I shall buy a licence and we shall marry. It will be done before we face them. There will be no talk of you being ruined. I won't allow it."

Odette let out a little laugh, still unable to believe her good fortune, that this man, this good man, would save her.

"So, tell me what happened. What made you run away from him?"

Odette bit her lip. "We 'ad a terrible row. He wanted me to—"

Charlie moved closer to her and put his arm about her shoulder as she broke off, her nerves getting the better of her. What would he say when he realised the powerful family she had offended so gravely was one of his neighbours? They must be. He'd told her he lived not three miles from here, likely on the Blackdown estate, even. He would know the Blackdown name, might know them as friends, might not want to risk offending them.

"He told me I must marry," she said in a rush, determined to get the words out. "I was given no choice. I was to marry Lord Blackdown's heir, Viscount Debdon. We went to stay with them. The earl was polite enough, but… but the wretched viscount didn't even have the decency to come and meet me. I was so afraid, so unhappy, and yet I made myself go, I made myself act the part of dutiful niece. I promised I would behave as a young lady and do what was asked of me, and he… he couldn't even stir himself to come and see me. It was dishonourable and I'm afraid I was very angry. I thought perhaps all Englishmen acted this way. I was wrong."

She glanced up at Charlie to see him staring at the fire, a fierce but unreadable expression on his face. He felt her gaze upon him and turned.

"Go on," he said softly.

"Uncle was so furious at the slight. He and the earl rowed over his son's shocking behaviour, and then my uncle got cross with me, as though it were my fault, and… I stormed out. I went out for a walk to calm down. It *was* only supposed to be a walk, but I didn't stop, and before I knew it, the sun was going down and I was lost… and I

realised I did not want to go back. Not to my uncle, and certainly not to a man who couldn't be bothered to even meet me, and so… here I am."

Odette finished her story, breathless and nervous, hardly daring to hear what Charlie would say about it. He was tense. She could feel it singing through his body where she leant into him, and her heart plummeted. *Don't be a coward, Odette*, she told herself. She must face it, she must allow him to withdraw his rash proposal if he wished to do so. Her eyes were burning as she dared to look up at him again, her throat tight with anxiety.

"Charlie?" she said. "Do… Do you hate me?"

"What?" he said, looking appalled at the idea. "*No*! Good God, no. I… Oh, Lord, Odette."

To her dismay, he put his head in his hands and groaned.

"It's all right." The words only quavered a very little. "I will release you from your offer. I should not like to cause you difficulties with the Blackdown family."

He looked up, swallowed hard, and then took a deep breath. She watched as he moved in front of her and took her hands.

"Odette, will you trust me, please? I know I have no right—"

"*Oui*!" she said at once, squeezing his fingers. "Of course. I do trust you. I said yes, didn't I? We will be married, if… if you still want to."

He nodded but still looked unhappy. "Then hear me out. I'm going to tell you something you won't like one little bit… but give me a chance to explain. Please."

Odette felt a flare of alarm at his words, but she nodded her agreement. He let out a long breath before he raised his gaze back to hers.

"Odette, the Earl and Countess of Blackdown *are* my family."



Chance waited for the inevitable explosion. Her hands slid free of his, her eyes glittering with indignation. He saw her gather herself, saw her shoulders go back, her chin raise a little.

"Explain," she said, the word calm, if a little abrupt.

"Yes," he said, relieved she was giving him the opportunity and not reaching for the nearest blunt object. "My father and I have been at odds for some time, Odette. As I told you, he was furious with me for going to war, but as soon as I returned, he said it was my duty to marry and get my heirs. I'd just returned, though, and…."

Odette nodded, and he knew she understood that much. He'd not been ready.

"He gave me a year but said that, at the end of it, I must have chosen a bride or he would do it for me. Well, a year came and went, and I'd had several warnings but, two weeks ago, he wrote to me to tell me he'd done the job I'd been incapable of doing myself. I was to present myself at Blackdown House on the tenth of December to meet my bride–to-be. He told me to bring a ring and be prepared to propose."

"That's all?" Odette asked, wide-eyed. "You knew nothing of me?"

Chance laughed and shook his head. He reached out and traced the line of her jaw with a fingertip as longing rose inside of him, hot and impatient. "Not even your name."

"Oh!" she fumed, her eyes flashing fire and making him damn near breathless. "What an odious manner of doing things. Your father is as bad as my uncle."

"I've no argument with that, love," Chance said as a weight lifted from his shoulders. "I'm afraid I was angry, though… petulant, I suppose, at having my life organised for me. So, instead of turning up and facing him like a man, and at least meeting the beautiful girl he'd chosen for me, I went to a friend's house and got drunk and… lost track of time."

Odette snorted and rolled her eyes at him.

"I have regretted it, I swear, Odette. I had no idea it was you. Good Lord, if I'd had an inkling, nothing would have kept me away, but I intended to present myself to the young lady I had so insulted and offer my most sincere apologies. I swear that is true."

She studied his face for a long moment before nodding.

"I believe you. I should have acted badly too in the circumstances." She gave a little bark of laughter, adding, "I did!"

Chance grinned at her and pulled her close again.

"It's fate," he said. "The two of us meeting like this. And perhaps I ought not have been so angry with my father. He chose well, after all. Better than I deserve."

Odette let out a breath. "You still wish to marry me then?"

"I do, and think how much easier it will be. They want us to be married, so we'll just save them the fuss of a big wedding and get the job done."

Her face clouded, and she shook her head. "My uncle wanted the fuss. He wanted a lavish London wedding for all the world to see, to

help bring him back into society. He wants my money, too."

"What?" Chance asked.

"I am an heiress, Charlie," she said, almost apologetically. "But that is not your name, is it?"

Chance blinked, still a little winded by everything he'd just learned, including… an heiress? Good heavens.

"No. It's Chauncey Kendall, Viscount Debdon." He smiled and, though they were both still sitting on the mattress, bowed to her. "*Enchanté*, Mademoiselle de Bethencourt."

"*Enchantée*, Monseigneur Debdon."

They laughed.

"My friends call me Chance," he said. "Because I'm a lucky devil. I begin to see how right they were."

"You do?"

Chance's heart thudded in his chest at the soft look in her eyes. She was so close. He could smell the scent of his shaving soap upon her skin and it lit something hot and possessive inside of him.

"I do," he said, leaning in and brushing his lips over hers.

She gasped, her eyes fluttering shut. Chance slid his arm about her waist and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. She opened to him with no urging, her tongue touching his, shyly at first and then with greater conviction as she learned the way of it. Her hand came up to his neck and the change in position overbalanced her. She fell back against the mattress and Chance followed her down. He broke the kiss, staring down at her. She had been through enough these past days, he would not compound the indignity she'd suffered by making love to her on the kitchen floor of an empty farmhouse. He could do better than that, and he would. She would not have the great wedding she had no doubt wished for, but the least he could do was treat her like the lady she was. Chance moved away a little, and the disappointment in her eyes was both a balm to his ego and an added torment. Unable to resist, he leaned in and kissed her again, a brief touch of his lips to hers.

"Tomorrow night we'll be married," he said.

She sighed. "That seems a very long time. Kiss me again, please."

"Oh, Lord," he murmured. "This is going to kill me."

He did as she asked, too aware of the warm, lithe body beneath his hands. He drew back again, breathing hard.

"No," he said sternly. "I don't have enough willpower for this kind

of torture. We must stop now."

She pouted, her irritation as heartfelt as his own and utterly adorable.

"I think it is going to be a very long night," she said sadly, and with such gravity Chance burst out laughing.

He stole another kiss, pulling her closer against him. His hand drifted down her back, over her hip, to cup her lovely behind while he tugged her closer still and groaned at the impossibility of it. Too many layers of fabric kept them apart. *Stop it, stop it. While you still can.* He broke away with a muttered oath.

"We'll be married tomorrow," he said, his voice hoarse as he brought himself firmly back under control.

He sat up and pulled Odette with him, before the temptation to get carried away was too strong to resist.

"The snow is melting so we'll set out for Exeter first thing. My uncle is bishop there. He and my father don't get alone. It'll tickle him no end to marry us without his brother's knowledge. No point in having a bishop in the family if you can't make use of the fellow."

"Oh, but he'll think you're marrying a… a…." She stared down at her rumpled clothes, at the muddy hem of her gown.

"Don't fret, love. We'll buy you something first. Something as beautiful as you are, though you'll regret it when I'm so dazzled I can't remember my name."

"As long as you say *oui* in all the right places, I shall not mind at all," she said with a smile. "Merci, Charl— *Chance.* You make me very 'appy."

Chapter 6

"Wherein a hasty wedding."



15th December 1817. Corry Brook Farm. Devon.

They set off after an early breakfast, ensuring to leave the farmhouse as they'd found it. Chance would let no one think Mrs Burrough had not left the place spick and span, and so they tidied and washed up, and he left some money with a note explaining it was for the broken window. He said nothing about who broke it or why. They could wonder about that.

It was an easy enough journey from the farm to Exeter in good weather and usually took no more than two and a half hours. With the roads full of slush and mud, and them both riding Ransom, it would be long and tedious, so when they got to Honiton, Chance bespoke a private room for them and left Odette whilst he hurried off and hired a carriage. Then he visited a dressmaker and paid a king's ransom for the woman's discretion and speed in going to the inn where Odette waited, to dress her for her wedding day. He spun some tale about a carriage accident, but doubted she believed him. She likely suspected they were eloping but, either way, it did not matter. The woman knew who he was and where her bread was buttered. A promise to be given the chance to outfit his future viscountess was not to be scoffed at, so she'd hold her tongue. Chance was further indebted to her when she suggested her youngest apprentice seamstress, Anne, go with them in the guise of Odette's maid, thus lending a modicum of respectability to their journey.

Chance waited as Odette disappeared to one of the bedrooms with Anne to change.

With time to think, he fretted about meeting his Uncle Will. Last night, he'd felt certain Will would marry them, but now, in the cold light of day, he wondered if he'd been hasty. His father would not be pleased with Chance's behaviour and it was unfair of him to drag Will into it but, he could not allow any stain to attach to Odette's character. It would all need hushing up as it was, but at least if they were married then propriety had been served, albeit in a rather unconventional manner.

At the sound of the door opening Chance looked up, and all thoughts of his uncle or his father's wrath were chased from his mind.

To his chagrin, he just stood staring like a fool, all sensible comments dissolving like sugar into syrup as his blood surged hot and addled his brain.

"Oh," he said helplessly. "Oh, my… you…. *Lovely.* You look quite astonishingly lovely."

This garbled compliment was accepted for its heartfelt sincerity, if not for its eloquence, and Odette beamed at him.

"How clever of you to find something so beautiful for me," Odette said, staring down at the gown and cloak with obvious pleasure.

It suited her perfectly, a soft dove grey velvet dress and matching cloak trimmed with swansdown. Chance could not take his eyes from her.

"Married," he said, taking her hand and practically dragging her from the room while the little maid, Anne, giggled and blushed at his determination. He didn't care. "We must get married today. Now. At once. Or I shall run mad."

The journey was a frustrating one, and it was well into the afternoon before they arrived in Exeter. Chance handed Odette out of the carriage and heard her soft intake of breath as she saw the cathedral. He smiled, realising then that she'd not have seen anything like it if her uncle had kept her all but a prisoner at his home. Chance made a promise to himself that, as soon as their honeymoon was over, he would take Odette to every party and play and event on offer, if she so wished. She could dance and meet new people and never again be so very alone. Nor he, he realised. He need not be alone either. The thought made something warm and happy unravel in his chest.

"Come along," he said with a grin and she laughed, almost running to keep up as he hurried inside.

"Oh, my," she breathed, stopping in her tracks despite him tugging at her.

She stared up and up at the immense, ornate building that arched high above their heads.

Chance paused, though he was taut with impatience and wanted nothing more than to find his uncle and get the deed done. For all he knew, Uncle Will might not even be here, and then they'd be in the basket.

"Chauncey? Is that you?"

With a sigh of relief, Chance turned around, recognising the voice. His uncle was a large, bluff man with a jovial face which made one

think more of monks of old, like Friar Tuck, than a bishop. Will was good-natured and enjoyed life, and did not always appear to take things as seriously as he ought, which was usually a source of contention between him and his older brother, the earl. Nonetheless, he was respected in his own right and it was not entirely his relationship to Blackdown that had seen him rise to the heights of Bishop of Exeter.

"It is you!" Will exclaimed, hurrying to meet his nephew. "Well met, my lad, well met. It's been an age, but what brings you… Oh, ho!"

Will beamed at Odette, his sharp eyes quickly falling to their linked hands and the hectic flush of colour staining her cheeks.

"Uncle," Chance said, deciding not to beat about the bush. "We need your help."

Not very much later, they were sitting in Will's office by a crackling fire and drinking tea. Personally, Chance would have given anything for a brandy, but he didn't think it the time or place to ask for one. Will was unlikely to bat an eyelid, but it didn't do to give one's bride the impression one was in the least bit agitated. By the time they had explained themselves, Will was muttering and tsking.

"That idiot, Blackdown! Whatever possessed him to do such a thing?"

Chance wisely kept his mouth shut.

"My uncle can be very persuasive," Odette offered.

Chance bit back a grin as her pretty French accent worked on his uncle.

"Delightful," the fellow murmured to himself before shooting Chance a conspiratorial grin. "Lucky devil."

"Chance by name," he replied with a smile.

"Still, it seems out of character for Blackdown to act in such an odd manner. Demanding you turn up with barely a moment's notice. No information about the girl, her family. Rum," Will said, shaking his head in consternation. "Very rum indeed."

"Perhaps it is the money," Odette offered.

"Money?" Will repeated, looking between them.

Chance nodded. "It seems Odette is an heiress. Though I don't see that swaying father to act so out of character as you say. It's not like he needs it."

"Oh, I don't know," Odette continued as Chance took a sip of his tea. "One 'undred thousand pounds could make even a rich man a

little mad, I think."

Chance choked.

Odette sprang to her feet and patted his back. "Oh, Chance! Are you all right?"

"P-Perfectly," he spluttered, still feeling somewhat dazed. "Did… Did you say…?"

She nodded, her expression grave.

"One 'undred thousand pounds. My parents left me everything when they died. You see now why my uncle is so…." She sighed and sat down again. "After André died, I think he went a little mad. I do not think it was all about the money. He did love André, though he never understood 'im, but losing the fortune he had counted on too…. It unbalanced his mind."

Chance stared at Odette for a long moment, a little dazed and not entirely certain what he felt. "You told me you were ruined, worthless."

She smiled, a sad expression that he hated to see. "I did not know you, did not know what you would say or do. So much money is a lure, it makes men do foolish things, and I *was* still ruined. No amount of money would make me acceptable to the *ton* once my reputation was so badly damaged, you know this, Chance, but now… I know you. I know you are a good man who would marry me not knowing who I was or whether I had a penny to my name. I know I can trust you, with my heart, and my fortune."

Chance swallowed down a sudden surge of emotion that caught him off balance. He reached out and took Odette's hand, holding it tightly as she smiled at him. Clearing his throat to move the pebble that seemed to have lodged there, he turned back to his uncle to see the man had gone all misty-eyed.

"Ah, young love," he said wistfully. "I remember it well."

"Well enough to help us?" Chance asked him. "We must be married at once if we are to have a chance of killing the scandal before it spreads."

Will looked from Chance to Odette and back again. He sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair. "Ah, well, Blackdown isn't speaking to me, anyway. I don't suppose it will change anything. Give me a few moments and I'll sort out the licence."

By four in the afternoon, they were married. Chance guided Odette back outside, blinking a little under the glare of a white sky.

Married. Good heavens.

"No regrets?"

Chance looked down to see Odette's dark eyes staring up at him, she looked pale and worried. His heart squeezed in his chest and he smiled.

"Not one, Lady Debdon," he said, before leaning down and kissing her, a quick press of lips. It was all he dared here, in case anyone saw.

"Lady Debdon," she repeated with a little laugh of surprise. "Oh, I like that, *c'est très joli*."

"Not as pretty as you, wife."

She blushed and Chance was relieved to see the colour return to her cheeks.

"Well, that was the easy bit," he said lightly, wishing his stomach hadn't tied itself in a knot over what came next. "Now we go home and face our relations."

Chance was not certain if it was luck or misfortune that gave them a bright moon to travel by, as the usually simple journey became an arduous crawl over poor roads, thick with mud and slush. If not for the moon they'd have given up when it grew dark and stopped for the night. For their wedding night. The temptation to stop was so damned tantalising, and yet he did not dare. They both knew yet another night away from home would only increase the likelihood of the scandal growing too big to manage, so they pushed on.

It was close to nine in the evening by the time they finally arrived at Blackdown House, though the impressive medieval fortified manor was less a house and much more a castle. In daylight it loomed over the surrounding areas, severe and forbidding to visitors, rather like the man who owned it. Set in a deer park that stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions, there was a feeling of time having been suspended. The earls of Blackdown had been here since the fourteenth century, a fact his father would beat Chance over the head with at every opportunity. Now, in the moonlight, and with the countryside still cloaked in white, the castle appeared like a villain in a melodrama, waiting to bring down the hero. Chance gave himself a mental shake and told himself to buck up and not be so bloody stupid. He had a wife now, and she was relying on him to make this right. So he would.

Chance handed a weary Odette down from the carriage, too aware of the terror in her eyes as she stared up at the unwelcoming edifice of his home. Though she had seen it before, it couldn't have looked welcoming at any point, but certainly not now in the eerie moonlight.

In truth, he loved the castle with his whole heart, every last mouldering stone. It was rather like a cantankerous aged relative; less than pretty, often bad–tempered, and yet beloved and familiar, with ties that ran deep into your soul.

"Don't be frightened," he said, taking her hand. "I know it looks like the scene for every gory Gothic novel you've ever read, but it's actually rather splendid when you get to know it and understand it."

Odette tore her gaze from the dark shape of the walls that towered over them and looked back at him, searching his face.

"You love it here," she said, the surprise in her voice audible.

Chance nodded. "I do."

Odette took a breath and put up her chin, a gesture Chance recognised now.

"Then I shall love it too," she said firmly.

He laughed, touched and delighted by her, but there was no time for anything more as servants poured from the entrance and his father's butler, Harris, came out to greet them.

"Lord Debdon," he said with a bow, before turning his gaze to Odette.

Harris never usually showed the least expression, being far too well trained display anything as plebeian as an emotion, but his eyes grew wide as he recognised her. This was tantamount to a hysterical fit in most other people, and Chance felt his pulse accelerate.

"Where is my father?" he asked.

"Lord Blackdown is in the library, my lord, with Monsieur le Marquis de Layon."

"Ah," Chance said, gripping Odette's hand a little tighter. "Two birds."

"*Mon Dieu*," Odette whispered, so quietly only he caught it, but he could sense her trembling beside him.

"Chin up, love," he murmured, and guided her into the castle.

He waved Harris away, telling the butler not to worry, he could find his father's study by himself and had no wish to be announced. He'd go in when he was good and ready. Perhaps they might wait for the next millennium.

"They are all staring at me," she said, her anxiety obvious as he guided her past the ranks of footmen his father insisted on having and on through the maze of the castle to the earl's study. "They must know what I did."

“Ignore them,” Chance told her, though his own nerves were leaping now, something that was not the least bit helped as they approached his father’s study and the sound of raised voices reached them. That it was audible even through the massive oak door that was as old as the castle itself was not reassuring. “Well, this should be exciting.”

Odette looked up at him, her eyes very wide and frightened in the lamplight. Chance leaned down and kissed her, as much to give himself courage as her. He’d been in battle—he’d survived Waterloo, for the love of God!—so facing his father ought not be this terrifying. His heart did not seem able to distinguish between war and the coming confrontation, however, and was battering behind his ribs with fury. He would not let his wife down, though.

Holding her hand tightly, he gave two sharp raps on the door and walked in.

Chapter 7

"Wherein a villain is exposed."



15th December 1817. Blackdown House. Devon.

Odette clung to Chance's hand. Had it only been that morning they had woken together on the mattress before the fire at Corry Brook Farm? Oh, how she longed to be back there now. The idea of feasting on fried potatoes and spending the day making snowmen and playing cards and kissing Chance… it was like a lovely dream, and she wanted to return to it and never wake up. Anything rather than meet the cold grey gaze of her uncle, who was staring at her like she'd just crawled out from under a stone. She could hardly bear to meet the earl's eyes, eyes she now saw were exact same shade of blue as his son's.

Still, she would not disgrace Chance by acting like some swooning heroine in a bad play, so she stiffened her backbone and returned his father's uncompromising gaze.

"*Now* you come home," the earl said to him with contempt. "Now, when you have caused the most chaos possible, you return and bring that… that wicked girl with you. What is the meaning of this?"

"Odette is not the least bit wicked, father, as I'm sure you know," Chance replied, with every outward appearance of calm, though he was pale even beneath the warm glow of the lamplight. "She was upset and afraid after her uncle spoke to her harshly. The lady went for a walk to calm her nerves and got lost, as many have done before now. If you'd been a little more assiduous in looking after her, or in searching for her, I would not have had to return her myself. As it is… I am very pleased to be able to do so."

"You dare lay this debacle at my feet?" his father demanded.

"Oh, no, sir. The blame is not entirely yours, though you did not see fit to give me the slightest information about the young lady you had decided I must spend my life with. The Marquis de Layon must share the blame equally for his machinations, and for frightening his niece enough to make her too afraid to remain in the same building as he."

Uncle Guy did not even blink. "Keep a civil tongue in your head, pup, or I might decide to remove it for you."

Odette shivered at the look in her uncle's eyes. His French accent was barely audible, as he felt he must excel in all things and so spoke five languages fluently. This need for perfection was not only aimed at himself, either. André had suffered cruelly for not being the man the marquis had wanted him to be. Now she would feel his wrath as her perfect reputation was sullied and spoiled.

"Well, child," he said, and the lack of inflection in his voice had always frightened her the most. She could bear it when he shouted and ranted, but that icy cold usually preceded the worst of him. "You have overturned all my plans and reduced yourself to a pitiful nothing, a whore to be bought and sold, and for what?"

Odette did not have time to gasp at the ugly words as another shock overtook the first. Chance dropped her hand, moving so swiftly she hardly saw it happen. One moment he stood beside her, the next he was standing toe to toe with her uncle, his face a mask of tightly controlled fury. Now she saw the soldier he had been, the warrior beneath the civilised exterior.

"Insult my wife again, *Monsieur*, and I shall have satisfaction at the end of a pistol."

For the next few seconds pandemonium reigned as Odette shrieked and ran to Chance, tugging on his arm.

"*Non*! *Non, non, non*," she cried, terrified that she might lose him before their lives had even begun.

"You're married?" the earl shouted, coming around his desk to confront his son. "How on earth—?"

"Wife?" exploded her uncle at the same moment, his eyes popping with fury. "What do you mean—"

"*Quiet*!"

Chance's voice echoed around the room and, rather to her astonishment, both the earl and her uncle were silenced. From the look in his eyes, Chance was a little taken aback too.

"Yes, we are married," he confirmed. "We saw Uncle Will this morning. He married us."

A measuring look that Odette was not certain she liked entered the earl's expression, but she had no time to consider as her uncle stalked up to her, eyes blazing.

"Did he take you yet?" he demanded.

Odette gasped, her cheeks blazing scarlet.

"Don't play the coquette now, girl," he sneered. "It's too late for that. Are you or are you not a virgin? Have you consummated the

marriage?"

"*N-Non*," Odette said, before she could think better of it.

A triumphant gleam entered the man's eyes, and he turned back to the earl. "Sign the settlement. It's to be done just as we arranged, though I will add a clause stating I be recompensed as you have been spared the expense of a wedding. Otherwise it is all as before, you only need sign the papers."

The earl leaned back against the desk, his expression unreadable.

"But the deed is done," he said, spreading out his hands. "They're married."

Uncle Guy stilled, a dangerous glint in his cold eyes. "Nothing that can't be annulled. You heard the girl, it's not been consummated. They're not legally wed yet, and they won't be if you don't keep to our terms."

"What terms?" Chance demanded, looking between the two men who were disregarding both him and Odette, too intent on their own power struggle.

"Might I remind you of exactly what you risk, my lord?" Uncle Guy said, his tone smooth. "The reason this little arrangement was so important to us *both*."

The words might have been mild, but that a threat was being issued was in no doubt.

The atmosphere in the room, already taut and strained, seemed to thicken with the violence of feeling between the two men. A soft knock at the door made Odette almost leap from her skin, so on edge were her emotions. She turned to see Lady Blackdown come in. Odette had liked the woman, who had been the only one to show her any warmth when she'd come to this daunting place. She was tall and elegant, with honey gold hair arranged in a simple yet stylish arrangement, and her elegant figure clad in deep green.

"Chauncey, darling," she said, her eyes alight with pleasure as she rushed to her son and embraced him. "We were so worried when you didn't come home. I told your father you must have gotten stuck in the snow, for I knew you would not be so rude on purpose."

Though there was a reproachful note apparent in her greeting, her expression was full of warmth.

"Yes, Mama, just as you say," Chance replied with a sheepish smile, clearly deciding he need give no more explanation at this stage. "But I was never so glad for it. I found a lost lamb, you see."

"Miss de Bethencourt!" his mother exclaimed, and before Odette

could blink she was enveloped in an embrace every bit as fierce as Chance had received. “Oh, thank the Lord, you’re safe. You *are* safe, unharmed?” she demanded, taking a step back to look her over, her concern genuine and so touching on a night filled to the brim with anxiety that Odette’s eyes filled.

“*Oui, Maman*,” she said, daring to address Lady Blackdown as a daughter might.

The lady stilled and covered her mouth with a gasp. Her gaze flew from Odette to Chance, who smiled at her.

“I’d like you to meet my wife, Mama, my Lady Debdon.”

“Lady Debdon?” his mother repeated in a daze.

Odette held her breath, wondering if Lady Blackdown’s happiness was only for her safety, if she no longer wished to welcome Odette into her family, if….

Odette gave a choked laugh as she was embraced again, and this time the lady pulled Chance towards her too, one arm around each of them.

“Oh,” Lady Blackdown cried, her voice thick with emotion. “Oh, you naughty children. I was so looking forward to seeing you both marry, but… but I’m so glad… so… so… ha—happy.”

She dissolved into tears and Odette watched in astonishment as the icy Earl of Blackdown ran to her, his expression one of horror.

“Lucinda, Lucy, my love… don’t cry.”

Lady Blackdown was gathered into her husband’s arms, heedless of the assembled company.

“You see what you’ve done, boy!” the earl said, furious now as he turned on Chance once again.

“Oh, no, Arthur, don’t. Please, I’m only crying because I am so happy and relieved. Look at them. Can’t you see they are made for each other? I just knew it… I knew the moment I set eyes on her. I told you we ought to have warned him. If you’d only let me send the letter I wrote….”

“What difference would that make?” his father demanded with a snort, adding with no little sarcasm. “*He* got stuck in the snow!”

Lady Blackdown returned a reproachful glance, looking up at her husband from under her lashes.

“Arthur,” she said, her voice soft and gently chiding.

Lord Blackdown dissolved.

Odette turned to Chance, wide-eyed with astonishment. During

her brief stay here she had only seen the forbidding earl himself on two occasions, both times with her uncle. He had not been present at her meetings with Lady Blackdown.

Lady Blackdown had been charming and kind. The earl had been cold and icily polite. The two of them together, though….

Chance winked at her and bent down to whisper in her ear. “My mother is a force to be reckoned with. He adores her.”

This was patently obvious as the earl let out a defeated huff, kissed the top of his wife’s head, and looked back at his son.

“Well, boy, hiding behind your mother’s skirts again, I see, but… well, we shall silence any talk. It will cost me a pretty penny, but I don’t suppose that will bother you a whit. Just get on and do your blasted duty. I want grandsons, and lots of ’em.”

Odette felt her colour rise again, but Chance only grinned and slid his arm about her waist.

“Yes, sir,” he said, bowing respectfully.

“Hmph,” said the earl, though there was a glimmer of humour in his eyes.

“Blackdown,” came a warning voice from the corner of the room that sent shivers chasing down Odette’s spine. “Aren’t you forgetting something? Remember what you stand to lose if you don’t sign that agreement.”

To Odette’s alarm, her uncle slid his cold gaze to Lady Blackdown before he met the earl’s furious eye once more.

“I don’t forget, damn you,” the earl said, his lips thinning into a taut line of displeasure.

“What agreement?” Lady Blackdown asked, her keen eyes settling on the marquis sharp and full of interest.

“Oh, just the marriage settlements, my love,” the earl said soothingly. Nothing for you to fret about. Now, why don’t you take the young people off and get them some refreshments? No doubt they’re famished after their tiring day.”

“In a moment, darling,” the lady said, smiling at her husband, though there was a glimmer of steel to the expression that gave Odette pause.

She glanced up at Chance to see his attention also riveted on his mother. Clearly, this was an expression he recognised.

“What is in the settlements, Arthur, dear?” she asked, though she still watched Odette’s uncle.

“Oh, just the usual, my love,” Lord Blackdown said at once, though Odette noticed the earl was sweating now, clearly realising, as her son had realised, that Lady Blackdown was going nowhere until she knew the details.

“Men’s business, my lady,” Uncle Guy said.

Odette suspected her uncle could have said nothing more calculated to make the lady dig in her heels, a conviction only strengthened as she saw the earl close his eyes.

“Oh, men’s business,” Lady Blackdown said, a dangerous edge to the softly spoken words. “How intriguing. Tell me, Arthur dear, is this the same men’s business you were discussing the night the marquis and his charming niece arrived here? The business where he was blackmailing you by threatening to expose your illegitimate daughter?”

There was a deathly silence, and the earl went the ghastliest shade of ivory Odette had ever seen. He staggered to a chair and sat down hard, clutching the arms so fiercely his knuckles were white. Odette gasped, fearing he would take ill.

“Fetch your father a cognac,” she said to Chance, who was gaping between his parents in obvious shock.

He just stood there, staring at the earl as if he was seeing him for the first time.

“*Dépêche toi*,” Odette urged, chivvying him up.

Chance jolted out of his trance and hurried to the decanter.

“My love,” the earl said, staring miserably at his wife. “My love….”

His voice was thick with emotion.

“What, Arthur, dear?” Lady Blackdown said gently.

The man who had exuded power and rugged health just moments earlier seemed to shrink before their eyes.

“I’m sorrier than you’ll ever know. We were barely married, and I… I did not realise what I had, did not realise the value, how precious it was. I was a damned fool. I have no excuses for you.”

His wife moved closer and reached for his hand, twining their fingers together. “How about that we were little more than children ourselves, and married far too young? That we barely knew each other, and that a marriage takes time and patience and commitment?”

“Lucy,” he said, staring at her in wonder. “You could forgive me?”

“I forgave you a very long time ago, Arthur.”

“You knew? You knew all these years?” he said, obviously stricken.

Lady Blackdown offered a sad smile and nodded. “I always hoped that you would tell me, but it is you who must forgive yourself. Your daughter is a fine girl and you’ve looked after her well, but you must ask her forgiveness too, for keeping her a secret so long. That was not well done of you, my love.”

“No,” Lord Blackdown said, his expression one of such naked adoration Odette felt they ought not be there at all. “No, it was not.”

Lady Blackdown leaned down and kissed her husband’s forehead. “You learned a lesson, Arthur, and you never, ever let me down again… until now, that is.”

Lord Blackdown straightened, meeting his wife’s gaze. A touch of colour rose in a face that was handsome, if austere.

“Father,” Chance said, offering his sire a glass of brandy.

He met Chance’s cautious gaze and let out a soft laugh.

“Thank you,” he said, and took the glass, downing the drink in two large swallows.

Then he stood, straightened his waistcoat, and approached Odette. She watched him with trepidation as he reached for her hand.

“I hope you can forgive me for what has passed until now, for…. My behaviour has not been that of a gentleman, far from it. I pray you might forgive me for my hand in this sordid business and allow me to start over. I welcome you to our family, Odette. I only hope you will not hold my actions against my son, for he played no part in it. He is a good man, an honourable one, and I am proud of him.”

Chance looked taken aback by this, but Odette thought she saw relief in his eyes alongside the surprise. She thought perhaps he had waited a long time to hear such words. For her part, she was only too happy to forgive the man. The burden he had been under was obvious now it had been lifted from his shoulders. The change was apparent and immediate, a glint of warmth and sincerity visible in his expression where she had found none before.

“I should be most ’appy to do so, *monseigneur*.”

“English, child,” her uncle snapped. “The word is *h*appy, and you address him as *my lord*.”

“You’ve said quite enough,” Chance said, turning on her uncle. “I think it best you leave and do it quickly. You will not be staying for Christmas.”

“Perhaps your wife might like to have a say in that decision,

Chauncey, dear," his mama remarked mildly, moving to stand beside her husband.

Chance coloured and looked to her, a flush of colour creeping up his neck.

"I beg your pardon," he began, but Odette shook her head and slid her hand into his.

She turned to her uncle, to the cold grey gaze of the man who had frightened her these past years.

"On this occasion, you will 'ave no argument from me," she said, deliberately dropping the 'h' to annoy her uncle. "I would like you to leave now, Uncle. Incidentally, I can imagine what the arrangement was: that you got my dowry and, in return, Lord Blackdown's secret was kept safe. Until there was something else you wanted, at least."

Fury flashed in the man's eyes, an expression which would once have cowed her into silence. "Odette, that is quite enough from you. You will hold your tongue and do as I say. This marriage is a farce and shall be annulled."

There was an angry, warning note to his voice, but Odette was done being afraid of this man.

"Uncle Guy," she began again. "I have no intention—"

"Stop going *on*, child," he snapped, heading for the door. "We are leaving. *Now*."

"*Non.* I will not leave, and I will not hold my tongue. Not any longer. Never again will I be frightened into obeying. Strange, is it not, Lady Blackdown, that where men are strong and firm and commanding, women *go on*, and *nag* and *harp*. the words are correct, I think? My English is not quite perfect, as my uncle rightly says."

"Oh, I think your understanding quite superior on all counts, my dear," Lady Blackdown remarked, her amusement obvious. "A nagging wife is not to borne, is it Arthur?"

Her husband raised her hand to his lips. "I do not believe I have been nagged once in all the years I have known you, Lucy."

Lady Blackdown shrugged. "But that is because you have a superior intellect, my darling, and recognise good advice when you hear it."

Their eyes met and Lord Blackdown grinned at his wife, adoration shining in his eyes.

Odette laughed softly. Her mother-in-law was a strong woman, a woman who knew what it took to survive in a man's world, and she had made a friend of her husband who quite obviously respected and

loved her. Chance was a good man, and their marriage would be a success, she was certain of it. She turned back to her uncle, who had watched the exchange with a curl of disgust at his lips. Odette sighed.

"It may be that I can forgive you in time, Uncle Guy. I remember when André and I were children, you were kinder then, not so cold and greedy, but that was a very long time ago and these memories are fresh yet. We shall see, but for now I should like to celebrate my marriage and Christmas with my husband and his family."

"Your family, dear," Lady Blackdown said.

Odette blinked very hard as the room became blurry.

"*My* family," she repeated, and smiled.

Chapter 8

"Wherein a marriage begins."



15th December 1817. Blackdown House. Devon.

The great house was thrown into a flurry of activity as preparations were made for the unexpected newlyweds. Chance's room had been made ready for him some days previously, but now his wife's belongings were moved there too.

His wife.

Chance tried to make sense of the emotions jostling about in his chest but soon gave up. It was a confusing tumble of happiness, pride, anxiety, and hope. There was no point in trying too hard to understand it. They were married, and they would make their lives together.

Much to his relief, Chance's rooms were in the south tower, an elegant suite far removed from his parents. Bad enough his wedding night would take place under their roof without *that* mortification. Though, glancing at Odette, he saw she was exhausted after the trials of the day. Galling as it was to admit, he too was worn to a thread. It was not so much the early start and tedious journey, but the stress and anxiety that had pressed down on him all day that had wearied him. Well, he would play it by ear. As desperately as he wanted to take his wife to bed, he would not have their first night be anything less than perfect.

Whilst preparations were being made, his mother had settled them in her parlour. It was one of the smallest rooms in the castle and her favourite place, snug and comfortable, with pretty, soft furnishings and a blazing fire. She'd provided them with a light repast and tea and, to his everlasting gratitude, a decanter of brandy. When she returned to them a short time later, she was all smiles.

"Well, now. A bath has been prepared for you, Odette dear, and Anne is waiting to help. Harris will show you the way to your rooms, and Chance will be up in a little while."

Odette's embarrassment was plain enough, but she mumbled her thanks and fled, not looking at Chance as she went.

"Poor child," Mama said as the door closed. "I shall have a talk with her before you go up, Chance. Never having a mother no doubt

means she hasn't the slightest idea of what a wedding night entails."

"Er, thank you," Chance muttered, feeling every bit as awkward as Odette had.

His mother snorted. "Oh, do stop looking so horrified, Chauncey, darling. You just make sure you are kind and patient tonight… well, *all* nights, I hope. Encourage her to talk to you. She's a lovely girl and I think you are very lucky indeed, so don't mess it up."

"Mother!" he protested, willing her to say no more, for his toes were curling already.

Lady Blackdown let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head. "Listen to me, Chauncey, and attend my words well. You barely know each other and, though I am certain you are well matched, it is all too easy for even a good marriage to go awry, as you have seen this evening. What I told your father was true. A marriage takes time, commitment, and understanding. Whatever happens, talk to each other. Do not hide your feelings, or bury resentment. It will fester. No matter how awkward, you must share yourself, all of you. It is the only way to happiness."

Despite his discomfort, Chance looked to his mother, hearing the determination in her voice, the insistence that he heed her words. He nodded and took her hands.

"You were ever the wisest of all of us, Mama. I won't forget your words, I promise."

She smiled and leaned in to kiss his cheek.

"Are you and Father…?" he began, not knowing quite what to say.

"We are well, dear. Do not fret for us. I am happy, if I am honest. I have wanted to speak of this with your father for many years, for any punishment I once felt he deserved has been long since delivered. The burden of guilt is a terrible thing, son. Remember that."

Chance nodded, certain that was one lesson he would never need to learn. His father's face as he realised Mama knew the truth—the regret etched deep into his eyes—had made an impression that Chance would not forget in a hurry.

"The scandal, though," he said, his heart turning at the idea Odette might be hurt by gossip, that people might shun or ridicule her. "She was missing for so long."

"All in hand," Mama said with a smug smile. "When she did not come back that first night, I went out and visited Mrs Mugford. It seems Odette sprained her ankle, and that dear lady took her in. I've been visiting daily, taking little treats to keep the patient amused."

Chance gaped at his mother whose eyes twinkled with mischief.

"I am the Countess of Blackdown, Chauncey, dear. Do not underestimate me."

"Does Father know?" he demanded, stunned. "Who else knows?"

His mama shrugged. "I told your father I had it hand, but he does not know the details. He was too angry with you both to listen to sense at the time, so I let him stew. Mrs Mugford knows the truth, of course, as does Harris and John Coachman, but they are all loyal. I trust them implicitly."

"You are a marvel, Mama," Chance said, shaking his head in wonder. "Truly, a marvel."

"Yes," his mother said with a sigh as she walked to the door. "I am, and Odette will be too, if you allow her, Chauncey. If you give her the chance to be your friend as well as your wife."

Chance smiled.

"She already is," he said, knowing it was true.



Though it had been the most mortifying half an hour of her entire life, Odette was endlessly grateful to Lady Blackdown for her *little talk*. Without the trace of a blush and with a no-nonsense, practical-tone, Odette's new mama explained what she could expect from her wedding night, and the nights thereafter. When she was done, she embraced Odette and kissed her cheek.

"I have five married daughters, Odette, and each one of them told me my advice was sound. You may rely on it. Besides which Chauncey is a kind-hearted man. You will have no difficulty, I think."

With that, Lady Blackdown patted her hand and sailed out of the room again.

Goodness.

Still a little dazed, and not a little intrigued, Odette lay back against the pillows and awaited her husband. She must have fallen asleep, for when she woke, Chance was laying beside her, watching her.

"Chance," she murmured sleepily, reaching for him.

He gathered her to him and she gave a happy sigh at the feel of his arms about her, the warmth of his body enveloping hers.

"Darling," he said. "You can sleep if you like. It's been a long day, I know. I've arranged for us to go away tomorrow. There is a little cottage by the sea not far from here. It's quiet and private. We used to

go there with Mama, as children, and sea bathe. Too cold for that now, but it's very beautiful. I should like to show you."

"A honeymoon," she said, smiling.

Chance laughed and shook his head. "The first part of our honeymoon. I want you all to myself for a short while, but then, if you should like it, we shall go off and explore together. Paris, Rome, wherever you like. Parties, the theatre… name your desire. Tell me where you want to go, what you wish to see, and we shall see it."

She sat up, excitement gathering inside her at his words. "You mean it? We can go anywhere?"

Odette had dreamed of travelling. It had been the one high spot of knowing she would marry André, a man who could only ever be her friend. He had promised her they would travel together, that they would have fun and leave his overbearing father behind them.

"Of course I mean it. Your life has been confined, Odette. I do not mean to trap you again with our marriage. I want to set you free, love. Providing… Providing you always fly back to me, though I should very much like to fly with you, if I may."

"Oh." She buried her face in his neck, holding on tight, overcome with happiness.

He laughed and held her, one warm hand stroking up and down her spine, unravelling her senses. "There, there, we shall speak of it in the morning. I know you're exhausted. Go to sleep."

To sleep?

It was true enough that Odette was exhausted. At least, she *had* been exhausted. Now, though, the scent of him filled her head, a dizzying melange of soap, musk, and warm, virile male. It was intoxicating. She considered Lady Blackdown's words and something hot and exciteable squirmed inside of her. Odette pulled back a little, now realising her new husband was wearing only a dressing gown. She glanced down the bed, to see his legs and feet were bare. *Oh.*

Tentatively, she moved her foot and slid it from his ankle to his knee and back again. Hair rasped intriguingly beneath her toes. How curious. Chance had gone very still.

She looked up at him then, studying his face, noticing the way his eyes had grown so very dark. "I don't want to sleep."

"Oh, thank Christ for that."

She gave a startled laugh as he kissed her, and wrapped her arms about his neck. He pushed her gently down, deepening the kiss. He had kissed her before, but not like this. Before, he had been careful;

they had both been too aware of the dangers of getting carried away and so had held back. Not now. Now there was no holding back, nothing to stop them, and the kiss went on and on. Chance's hands moved over her, slowly at first, gently, but with increasing desperation as the heat between them grew, bubbling up into something Odette had no name for, but gave in to with no regrets.

She gasped against his mouth as he hooked her knee and pulled it up, over his hip. He pressed closer and the touch of that masculine part of him against her most intimate skin was like a starburst behind her eyes. Sensation jolted through her and she clutched at him, staring up in surprise.

"Oh," she said.

Chance grinned at her. "Like that, do you?"

"*Oui*," she nodded, proving her point by lifting her hips.

He groaned, the sound sparking a triumphant blaze of heat and want deep inside her. Before she could do it again he was shrugging off his dressing gown, throwing it from him with an impatient gesture that made her smile. He turned back to her and her breath caught at the sight. She drank him in, cataloging everything she saw with breathless anticipation. Powerful shoulders, strong arms, and a scattering of dark hair over his broad chest. The hair continued on down, drawing her gaze lower. Odette swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry as looked her fill. He was beautiful. She did not think she had properly understood the word before, applying it to a pretty garden, or a gown she longed to own. He too was beautiful, though there was nothing soft or feminine about him. His body was a harsh landscape of muscle and sinew, punctuated here and there with scars that told the story of his soldiering days. She would hear him tell those stories one day, the tales that lay behind those scars, but not now, not tonight.

"Touch me," he pleaded, his voice a rasp of sound that made her skin prickle with awareness. "You cannot look at me so and not touch me."

Odette did, more than willing to oblige. She had been longing to touch him since that first brush of his lips upon hers. She trailed a finger along his jaw, which was freshly shaven since last she saw him, the skin smooth and warm. She followed the path down his neck, pleased at the shiver that ran over him as she traced the line of his collar bone.

"Odette," he said, his voice hushed, and she was unsure whether it was a question or a plea, or simply the need to say her name, but she looked at him and found his eyes dark with wanting.

She held his gaze as her hand continued on its journey, straying to the flat disc of one dark nipple and lingering there. His breath hitched and she smiled. He did too, with a soft huff of amusement.

"You enjoy torturing me, wife."

"Mmmm," she replied, dropping her gaze to that dark trail of hair as her fingers moved through it. "I do, but I can stop if you prefer?"

"No," he said breathlessly. "No, please… *please* don't stop."

She trailed a finger down the hard length of his arousal, intrigued by the silk and the heat and the strength of him, and by the pained sound that tore from his lips as she grew bold and curved her hand about him.

"*Montre moi*," she said, unable to take her gaze from the place her hand wrapped about him.

"Love," he said. "I can barely understand English right now, don't test me."

She laughed, delighted by him, rewarding him by leaning down and pressing her mouth to his.

"Show me," she whispered against his lips. "Show me how to please you."

"Take this off first," he demanded, tugging at her nightgown. "It would please me to see my wife in all her perfection."

Odette sat up on her knees and did as he asked, pulling the nightgown over her head and revelling in the rapt expression on her husband's face. She had expected to feel shy, awkward and foolish, but Chance made her feel none of those things.

"How lovely you are," he said reverently, pulling her back down to him. They lay side-by-side, staring at each other. "I'm so happy I married you, Odette. I'll try to be a good husband to you, I promise."

"*Oui*," she said, nodding. "I know that you will."

He kissed her then, a kiss that made the fire he'd already lit blaze hotter, but she pulled back, wanting to know, wanting everything.

"You said you would show me how to please you," she reminded him.

"Everything about you pleases me," he said, kissing a path down her neck. "And I shall show you, with the greatest of pleasure, but not now. Now I want to please you, I want to make you my wife, and I fear things may proceed too quickly if I let you loose upon my person."

She frowned at him, a little puzzled, but he smiled and caressed

her cheek.

"Trust me?"

At that, she let out a breath and nodded. "Always."

He carried on kissing her neck, her shoulders and she held her breath as he moved lower, shivering as he traced the valley between her breasts with his tongue. Her anticipation mounted as his mouth moved, lips brushing the soft curve of her breasts, and then he took her nipple into his mouth and suckled, and her mind whited out.

It took a moment before she realised she was clutching at his hair, writhing beneath him, exclaiming in French, in English, and in a language she had never realised she knew, but which seemed composed of soft gasps, little cries, and deep, decadent moans of pleasure. Such wickedness! Surely she was speaking in tongues, not that she cared a whit as he moved lower and applied his diabolical talents to the delicate place between her thighs. The shock of it might have made her swoon if she had not been so eager for him to do so. Though Lady Blackdown had not mentioned such attentions during her little talk—and thank the good lord for that, for she'd never have been able to look the woman in the eyes again—Odette's body did not seem to be in any way disturbed by this turn of events. Indeed, the way that secret place throbbed and clamoured was a fair indication that this was not only normal but desperately required. So she gave herself over to it, trusting in him, and in herself, to know what came next.

He knew. Of course he did. He settled between her legs and smiled as she protested at her pleasure being halted. It began again, though, with the silken slide of his body against her, and once again the sparks flew, hotter and fiercer than before.

"Chance," she said, clutching at his shoulders.

"Let me in now, love," he said, and she became aware of an insistent pressure, of the blunt head pressing inside.

This, then, was what she had been told to expect. She took a deep breath, calming her breathing, attempting to relax, and suddenly—

"Odette?"

She stared up at him, eyes wide. It had not hurt, at least nothing more than a little pinching sensation, but now…. It was an odd feeling, so strange, so full, so….

"*Odette*?" Chance's voice was anxious, his body quivering with tension above her. "Love?"

"Oui, I'm fine, it's all right… don't stop."

He let out a ragged breath, his relief so obvious that she giggled. His blue eyes met hers, amusement and happiness shining there.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"*Non. Ah, non, mon beau,* never that. It is only that you are so wonderful. You take such care of me."

"I always will," he whispered, and then he was kissing her, and moving inside her, and his hands were caressing her and… *Oh.*

The intimacy of it, the rightness of being here with this man, her husband, was astonishing. Tears pricked at her eyes as the perfection of it overwhelmed her, so much so that she was almost afraid it would be spoiled somehow, but she trusted in him to guide her, and followed where he led.

Even so, it was a shock, albeit a delicious one, as the pleasure gathered inside her, an urgent, frantic sensation building up and up until she hardly knew what to do with herself. It was at once too much and not enough, and she almost shouted at him to help her before she went mad, but then she was flying apart. Something bright and lovely exploded inside her, shattering into a million pieces. She cried out and her body jerked and shuddered, out of control as she was fragmented and thrown into the heavens. The strangest thing, though, was that as she came back to herself, she was no longer an odd collection of pieces, there was nothing broken or missing, only rearranged… complete for the first time in her life.

She held him as the pleasure took him too, sliding her palms over passion-dampened skin and knowing she would never forget the sound of his release, the way he called her name, the way he told her he loved her.

As his breathing steadied, he stared down at her. Odette met his gaze. She put her hand to his cheek, knowing full well her heart was in her eyes.

"*J'taime,* Chance. I love you too."

Epilogue

"Wherein a Christmas tradition."



20th December 1822. Ivy Cottage. Devon.

"Must we really leave?" Chance grumbled, pulling the covers up about them and tugging Odette closer. He spooned around her back, one hand settling over her burgeoning stomach.

"You know very well we must, and don't pretend you don't want to go. You adore Christmas at Blackdown."

Chance chucked and kissed her shoulder. "What, all my six sisters in one place with their dreadful children and husbands? Good heavens. Whatever gave you such a fanciful notion?"

"Well, you've been counting the days since November," she said dryly. "That was my first clue."

He harrumphed but did not argue the point. They both loved Christmas at the castle, complete with chaotic family. It was strange how Odette had once seen Blackdown as being cold and frightening, when now the sight of the big old place coming into view gave her a burst of happiness, a sense of coming home. Not that they didn't have their own home, too. They had chosen one of Chance's smaller properties to make their own, and had rebuilt it extensively. It was wholly theirs, their joint project, and they loved it dearly. They had travelled a lot in the first years of their marriage, just as Chance had promised, until Odette had fallen pregnant, and then she had not been sorry to go home, too excited by the prospect of their baby to think of much else. Coming home to the castle, though, that was special too. Chance adored seeing his sisters and had become especially close to his half-sister, Marie.

They shared their father's blue eyes and were obviously siblings, bickering amicably and involving all their sisters in their ridiculous arguments. They quite obviously adored each other's company and saw each other as often as was possible. They looked forward to Christmas most of all, though, as they shared it with Lord and Lady Blackdown, whose happiness in seeing them all was bright and honest on each occasion.

"Father will spoil Oliver rotten again," Chance grumbled. "He's a very different grandfather than a father. I never got treated that way, I can assure you."

Odette turned to face him, a complex manoeuvre, as her large stomach hindered her progress.

"He's mellowed," she said, reaching up to stroke her husband's face. "And he's so proud of you, *mon beau.* Of you and Oliver. It shines from him. Haven't you noticed he drives your poor brothers-in-law distracted, forever retelling stories of your heroics during the war? They can't possibly live up to your legend."

Chance frowned over that. "He does do that, doesn't he? Do you know, I didn't even realise he knew those stories, that he had followed my career? He was always so angry with me for going."

"Because he was afraid of losing you."

"I thought it was just the title," he admitted, shaking his head. "For such a long time I thought that was all he cared about, but now, seeing him with our son…."

"He finds it hard to say things aloud, Chance, that is all. You must read between the lines. Or, failing that, ask your mother."

"Or you," he said, nuzzling into her neck.

Odette shivered as his lips feathered kisses over her skin.

"Or me," she agreed, closing her eyes and smiling.

"It is lovely here, though," he murmured. "And I shall be sorry to leave."

"It is."

It had become their tradition to return to Ivy Cottage for a week before going to the castle for Christmas. This was where they had spent the first blissful week of their marriage, and every year they added to the memories. They came in the summer, too, as Chance had done when he was a boy. This year he had begun to teach three-year-old Oliver to swim, much to both of their delight.

"Perhaps we should come back here after Christmas, too," Chance murmured, stroking a lazy hand over the curve of her stomach. "Once we return home, you'll be swept up in a whirl of activity, and the house will be full to the brim with your friends from morning till night. I think I shall be a masterful and cruel husband, and insist on having you all to myself for another week."

"Indeed, how cruel you are, *monseigneur*," she sighed, knowing why he was doing it. He didn't mind a bit if her friends came, he only fretted that she was doing too much, that she was tired, and he wasn't entirely wrong so she would not fight him over it. "But I am a good, biddable wife, and so I shall do as I am told."

There was a snort of such amusement that Odette felt compelled

to smack his hand.

"Devil," she said, laughing.

"Biddable," he crowed, the bed shaking with his mirth. "Oh, I shall have to share that one with Father. He worships the ground you walk on, but even he wouldn't have that."

"I am *most* biddable, providing you bid me to do something I believe to be a good idea," she retorted with a dignified little sniff. "There's no sense in being foolish about it."

"No, dear," he soothed. "None at all."

His hand crept up from her stomach to cup her breast, so much fuller now with her pregnancy in full bloom.

"Mmm," he murmured, turning her back over so his chest was to her back. "I do like these. Such a bounteous gift."

Odette huffed, but did not protest in the least.

"I wonder you can bear to look at me. I'm the size of a whale this time," she said, her tone light, though there was the tiniest thread of truth behind her words.

Chance stilled, and then pushed himself up on his elbow, staring down at her. She glanced back at him as he smoothed the hair from her face to get a better look at her.

"What nonsense is this?" he asked. "Do you still not understand how besotted I am, wife? I fell headlong into love with you the moment you peeked around the pantry door at Corry Brook Farm. Indeed, I fell so hard, it's a wonder I don't have a concussion still. You are everything I never dreamed of, everything I had no idea I even wanted."

She laughed at that and he grinned.

"It's true. I could never have dreamed something as lovely as you. I've not the imagination to create someone half so wonderful. You are my friend, my lover, my wife, mother to my children, and keeper of my heart. I love you like this," he said, placing his hand on her stomach. "And in all your beautiful guises. You may rely on that."

Odette blinked away tears as he settled back down beside her.

"*J'taime.*"

"I know," he said, sounding smug.

She smiled and closed her eyes, listening to the waves crashing on the shore beyond the cottage garden.

"There's quite a storm out there tonight."

Chance nodded. "A snowstorm."

She turned her head to look at him. “Truly?”

“Yes. I looked out before I came to bed, the world is white and pristine, just like the day I took refuge in an abandoned farmhouse. I remember waking beside you, listening to the wild melody of the storm outside.”

“A melody?” she said doubtfully as the wind howled about the walls of the cottage.

Chance nodded, trailing his lips over her shoulder.

“Mm-hm. When I am warm in a bed with you, and my heart is at peace, the rest of the world can rage and go to the devil, and all I hear is a melody. I heard it the first time I woke with you. My word, I was in agony. Did you know that? I was so desperate to act the gentleman, but I wanted you so badly.”

“I wanted you too,” she said, pleased by the way his eyes darkened.

“Yes, I know. I remember the look in your eyes.”

“Just like this.” She lifted her hand to trace a finger over his eyelid and he laughed.

“I expect so. I wanted to tumble you onto that mattress and make you mine, there and then, and instead I had to run out into the snow and take matters into my own hands,” he said ruefully.

Odette laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks.

Chance snorted. “It wasn’t funny at the time I assure you. I suffered agonies.”

“Oh,” she managed, chest heaving. “Oh, my… my poor Charlie.”

He grinned at the name, one she had kept to use when they were alone, to remind them of those first days together.

“I’ll let you make it up to me,” he said, his voice low and a wicked glint in his blue eyes.

“Ah, yes. You did teach me how to please you, after all. I suppose I ought not let your lessons go to waste.”

“*That* would be a crying shame.”

She snorted at the gravity of his words.

“Still, I shall make allowances for your….”

“Bulk?” she offered, one dark eyebrow quirked.

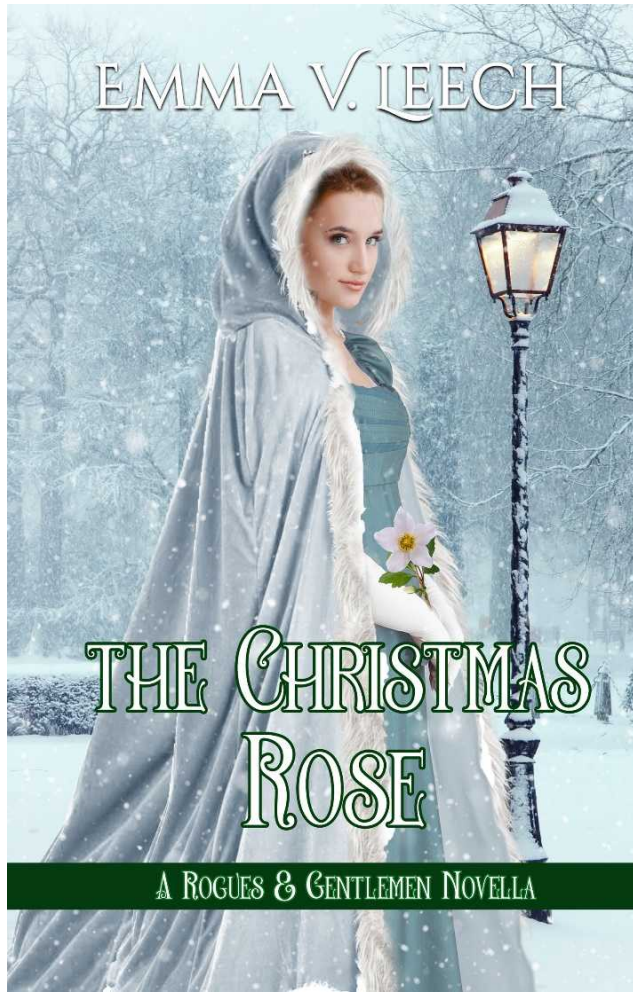
“Delicate condition,” he corrected, making her splutter again as he pressed his hips closer, his shaft hot and hard against the cleft of her bottom. “In the circumstances, I shall do all the hard work.”

“What an excellent husband you are,” she sighed as his hand drifted to the dark curls between her thighs.

“A paragon among men,” he agreed.

Odette closed her eyes and gave herself into her husband’s care, safe and beloved, and very well satisfied with her lot, and outside the wild melody of the wind howled across the countryside.

The Christmas Rose



Chapter 1

"Wherein our hero is caught in the parson's mousetrap."



7th December 1820. London.

Felicity Bunting was five and twenty, and on the shelf. Everyone knew it.

Well, not any longer.

As of ten minutes ago, she had become spectacularly engaged to the wickedest rake in Christendom.

Suddenly, the dusty shelf she had resented for so long looked rather appealing, and she wanted to climb back on it and stay there, forgotten and unnoticed. For the first time in her life, the idea was positively blissful.

If she was honest with herself, Bunty wished she *had* organised this dreadful scheme, as everyone obviously believed. If she had been the mastermind behind this horrid scandal, at least she might have felt some sense of power, of having achieved her aim. Instead, she was mortified and ashamed, and wished she could curl herself up very small and hide in a corner… though the idea of buxom Felicity Bunting being able to appear small was laughable in itself. In a world where the ideal woman was slender, wraithlike, and prone to fainting, Bunty was tall, plump, and in excellent health. She bounced rather than drifted ethereally into a room, and would always prefer to laugh and have another slice of cake than sigh dramatically and appear mysterious and tragic. She was no Gothic heroine, yet somehow she had just made a tragedy of her own life.

And not just hers.

"It will be all right, Felicity," her mother told her, though her gaze darted frantically between Bunty's father and the unwillingly betrothed Lord Courtenay.

They had made a hasty exit from the party they'd been attending, only to discover the devilishly handsome lord on their doorstep five minutes later. Now, Mrs Bunting was huddled with her daughter on a loveseat, and Bunty thought her mama was trembling harder than she was.

"Though really, child, why on earth you had to make things worse by saying he wasn't the man you'd wanted to trap…."

"*Worse*?" Bunty repeated on breath of laughter. It had a slightly hysterical tinge to the sound, so she snapped her mouth shut for a moment before adding, "And that was not at all what I said. I said the trap had not been meant for him. I never said *I* set the trap, did I? I'm as much a victim of this as he is."

"Well, at least you'll be married, dear." Her mother's voice held a faint note of satisfaction at that, and Bunty stared at her in outrage. Mrs Bunting flushed. "I'm sure he's not really as bad as the scandal sheets make out," she added in a rush.

Bunty snorted. She had followed the wicked man's escapades for years now, and hadn't the slightest doubt he was far worse.

Her husband-to-be—she winced—Lord Courtenay, was speaking to her father on the other side of the room. He radiated tension, as well he might, having just been trapped into marriage.

Of course, everyone believed she had arranged it. Why would they not? She was five and twenty years old and had never received an offer of marriage. Not one. There *had* been Mr Arkwright, three years ago. He had seemed promising, but then someone had sniggered rather too loudly over the fact that Bunty was a full three inches taller than him and she'd never seen him again. Not that she'd been heartbroken, far from it, but still….

She didn't want to be a spinster, an old maid, a burden to her parents. Not that they would ever say as much, or even think it. For all they despaired of her, they loved her and wanted her to be happy. Well, so much for happiness. Oh, of all the men to trap into marriage, why had it turned out this way? Lord Courtenay, of all people. Just looking at him made her knees feel all trembly and weak. He was just so… large and vibrant and… *powerful.*

Well over six feet tall, he was perhaps one of the few men to whom she had ever stood close and not felt like an Amazon. He had thick, black hair, curled in unruly waves, and his skin was not the pale, insipid colour of most Englishmen in the winter months. Instead, it had a golden tint to it that only added to the impression of virile good health, and then there were his eyes. Lord Courtenay had eyes the blue of a Mediterranean sea, piercing and utterly swoon-worthy.

She sighed.

And now he would hate her until the end of time. Marvellous.

"Felicity," her father said, a look in his eyes that suggested he believed she had run mad. If he thought she'd deliberately tied herself in marriage to this devilish fellow, she could hardly blame him. "The arrangements have been made. You'll marry the day after tomorrow."

Bunty swallowed and dared a glance at Lord Courtenay. His face was a mask. Her heart quailed. Lord Courtenay—Ludo to his friends—had always smiled at her up until now. She had never tried to fool herself that his smile had any meaning to it, past a faint sense of pity and a naturally amiable temper—well, amiable towards women, anyway. Ludo was a rake of the first order, a hell-born babe, a troublemaker, and a black sheep. He was the youngest son of the Marquess of Farringdon who had thrown him out years ago, and Ludo had responded by putting all his energy into blackening the family name as far as he might.

He'd done a spectacular job so far.

Yet, unlike many of the men she had encountered, he had never been cruel. Not to her, anyway. There had been no smirking or murmured comments for her to overhear and make her blush with mortification. He had always given her that smile that caused her insides to quiver and made her feel muddled and giddy. They had not met that often, but for Bunty it had always been a memorable occasion. She had carefully packed away the thoughts of that sensuous mouth curving upwards just for her, to be taken out and relived again and again on the days when she felt alone, fat, and unloved.

Now he'd likely wish her to perdition on a daily basis and never smile at her again.

Oh, well. Such was her fate. As her mother said, at least she was getting married.

Bunty tried not to cry.



One hour earlier…

Lord Ludovic Courtenay, youngest son of the Marquess of Farringdon, was bored. This was usually cause for concern. When Ludo was bored, bad things happened. To be fair, Ludo did not *intend* for bad things to happen, not anymore. He had been trying his best to behave himself for over a year now, but he simply appeared to be a magnet for trouble. If there was something brewing within a mile of his person, he would gravitate—quite unknowingly—towards disaster. It was a gift of sorts, and one he was beginning to wish he did not possess. Once upon a time, he had revelled in his ability to create chaos and turn any polite party into a re-enactment of Sodom and Gomorrah, or Gentleman Jackson's boxing club. Recently, however, it had become a millstone around his neck. He was bored and tired and… lonely. Everything he had always enjoyed had lost any appeal. Brawling and causing trouble had long since failed to satisfy him. He

supposed he must be getting old. A lowering thought. His ballet dancers and opera singers, and all the pretty ladybirds with whom he usually associated were lovely, and good company, and he was very fond of them, but….

But.

Ludo sighed and snatched a glass of champagne from a server. He ought not be here. This was not the kind of event he got invited to, which was why he'd had one of his less disreputable friends smuggle him in. The cream of the *ton* were here, and so he was not welcome. He'd be evicted at any moment, no doubt.

"Ludo, what the devil are you doing here?"

Ludo looked around to see the cool grey gaze of the Earl of Falmouth upon him.

"Falmouth," Ludo replied, smiling. "Don't worry, I'm on my best behaviour."

Falmouth snorted. His wife, the countess, gave a heavy sigh.

"Oh, *zhat* is a pity, and it is such a dull party, too," she said in her charming French accent.

Ludo grinned at her.

He liked the earl and his beautiful young wife. Unlike most others present, they were not the least bit stuffy. In fact, if the rumours about the earl were true, he was a dangerous man. Though close to two decades older than his wife, their marriage was a remarkable success. Tall, dark, and vigorous still, he was a striking figure, and his lovely French countess stared up at him as though he'd hung the moon for her alone. That the two of them adored each other was plain to see, and Ludo was struck by a jolt of something that felt remarkably like jealousy.

"Hunting, Ludo?" Falmouth queried.

"Hardly," Ludo lied, and felt an unaccustomed tinge of heat creep up the back of his neck.

The fellow was too astute for his own good. Ludo hadn't even admitted to himself that he'd come hoping to meet a nice young lady, and… and *what*? The usual experience was one of watching them blush and stammer and then remove themselves from his company as though the devil had come to tea. He supposed it was true enough. He had been so intent on punishing his family over the past years that he'd never stopped to consider he might be punishing himself, too. He'd made a career of showing his so-called father and brothers that he did not want them, just as they had spent his entire childhood

vividly illustrated how badly they'd not wanted *him*, and now… well, now no one else wanted him either.

After a few words with Falmouth and his lady, Ludo moved on, draining his glass on the way and snatching up another. Two young ladies passed by, arm-in-arm, chattering merrily until they saw him. They blanched and skirted around him as if they might be ruined simply by breathing the same air. Irritated, Ludo winked at them and they gasped, hurrying away. He snorted. This was utterly pointless. He did not understand why he had bothered to come tonight.

Liar.

And there she was.

Felicity Bunting was standing talking to Thomas Tindall. Tommy, to his intimates, was the Earl of Stanthorpe, and an easy-going, good-natured chap. Under normal circumstances Ludo liked him, only… only he was making Miss Bunting laugh, and….

Ludo's chest grew tight.

It was ridiculous, really. He didn't know her at all, had never spoken a word to her. On the rare occasions they had crossed paths, though, he had admired her. There was something wholesome and real about her, as if she was truly who she appeared to be, with no pretence, no façade. Ludo had noticed she laughed often and with no restraint: a rich, joyous sound that made him want to smile. That was such a novelty of late he always gravitated towards her, as though turning towards the sun. She was also gorgeous. Thick brown hair and wide eyes of the same colour complemented a heart-shaped face with rosy cheeks that blushed a deeper shade at the slightest provocation. All of that without even considering the body that must lay beneath her gown, and God, did he want to consider it. She was all curves and softness, and he wanted very badly to seek comfort in her embrace.

So, why had he not approached her, demanded a little voice in his head. Because he was a bloody coward. *Him*, the wickedest rake in London, if the gossip sheets were to be believed, and he was terrified to approach a nice, gently bred lady in case she reacted the same way as all the others. He didn't want to see her look at him in horror, did not want to see her gasp and take a step back. Which was why he was still dithering here, watching Tommy enjoy her company whilst he stood like a dog outside a butcher's shop, salivating for something he could not have.

Yet, she had always returned his smiles. On the rare occasions they'd been in the same room, she had not looked quickly away. She had met his eyes and held his gaze, and she had smiled back. Every time. Ludo remembered every one of those occasions, from the very

first, when his breath had caught in his throat in astonishment that such a woman should look at him with such open friendliness. That was where it had ended, though, for no one would dare introduce him to her. He'd all but begged on a couple of occasions, but with no joy. What kind of blaggard would introduce a man like him to such a lovely, innocent creature? Not one that Ludo had found. Though, perhaps Tommy….

Ludo moved forward. If he walked straight up to them, Tommy would feel obliged to make the introduction. The poor fellow was too good-natured to cut him. It was a rotten thing to do to such a nice chap, but needs must.

"Oh!"

Ludo stopped as someone ran into him.

"I beg your pardon," he said at once, though he was certain it had not been his fault. A woman gazed up at him in horror, a note clutched in her gloved hand. Was that one of the Ratched sisters? Ludo had reached out and taken her elbow to steady her, and now the woman appeared to be in shock. He let her go before she could scream blue murder. She was still staring at him, and still clutching the note. Ludo frowned.

"Is that for me?"

Her gaze darted wildly around the room. She looked as if she might be sick.

"Miss Ratched?" Ludo began, beginning to feel rather awkward. "The note. Was it meant—"

Before he could finish, she thrust the note towards him. Ludo took it from her, at which point she gave a little shriek and ran away. Good Lord! Did she think he would ravish her in full view of the blasted ballroom? Aggrieved, Ludo tore open the note and stared down at it with a frown.

Meet me in the library at ten o'clock. B x.

Ludo's breath caught.

B.

Felicity Bunting was known to her friends and family as Bunty.

Surely… Surely she wouldn't. He looked up, his gaze moving at once to where she was speaking to Tommy, and their eyes met. She smiled at him, a shy smile that made colour bloom on her cheeks, before she turned away again.

Hope rose in his chest. Ridiculous and foolish, for it was far more likely the B in question was a bored wife or a merry widow. There had

been enough of those in the past to know it was the most obvious answer. Yet he wanted it to be Bunty, even as he knew he ought not go if it were. Ludo checked his watch. There was an age to wait yet, but he wanted to be sure he knew where to go, and that they were not observed. She was a nice young lady. Innocent.

If they were caught….

If they were caught, she would have to marry him.

He set down his glass and went in search of the library.



Bunty seethed with fury. She'd been having a perfectly nice evening—a miracle in itself—when she had taken herself off to the retiring room to freshen up. There, she had heard the Ratched sisters whispering together. The older sister, Jennifer, was already married. The younger, Sylvia, was not, which was something Sylvia intended to rectify this evening. Bunty was only astonished they were working together. The two of them were rivals in all things, and she thought Sylvia a fool to trust her sister to help her. That was neither here nor there, however. The fact was, they intended to trap Lord Stanthorpe into marriage, and Bunty would put a stop to it.

"A Christmas wedding," Sylvia said, giggling. "And he's as rich as Croesus, Jenny. Richer than your sweet William."

Bunty left, rushing from the room before they came out from behind the screens and saw her. She pushed her way through the crowd until she found Lord Stanthorpe again. He was right where she'd left him earlier, thank goodness.

"Tommy!" she said, grabbing his arm and towing him away from a conversation with Aubrey Russell. "Sorry," she added over her shoulder to Aubrey as she dragged Tommy across the room.

"Whatever has got you in such a pet?" Tommy asked, anxiety in his eyes.

"Oh, Tommy, the Ratched sisters have hatched a scheme. If you get a note from someone signed B, do *not* believe it is from that pretty Belinda Lovelace you were so taken with. It's a trap. If you go to the library, as the note suggests, you'll find Sylvia Ratched waiting for you, and no doubt her sister and friends will burst in moments later."

Tommy blanched, the colour leaving his face so suddenly it might have been funny in other circumstances.

"Lud," he said faintly.

"Quite so," Bunty said, only too appalled by the vision of good-hearted Tommy married to such a shallow, mean-spirited creature as

Sylvia Ratched. “So you must not go.”

Tommy shook his head, his tumble of golden curls bouncing at the movement. “Indeed not. In fact, I’ll go one better. Dull affair, at any rate. Was going to take Aubrey to my club.”

“A splendid idea, Tommy.”

“Don’t need to tell me twice, Bunty, and I shall be on my guard from now on.” He reached out and took her hand, shaking it vigorously. “Thank you, Miss Bunting. I shall never be able to repay you. *Never*.”

Bunty smiled at him. “You’re welcome, Tommy. Now, do run along.”

She watched him hurry away and then turned. Bunty was not by nature a heroic creature, but such a vile scheme ought not only to be thwarted but exposed, even if she was the only witness. Taking a breath, she turned and headed towards the library, intending to give Miss Sylvia Ratched a piece of her mind.

Chapter 2

"Wherein misunderstandings and a hasty marriage."



7th December 1820. London.

Ludo had found the library with no trouble. It was well away from the ballroom, and an excellent location for a tryst. Now all he had to do was twiddle his thumbs until ten. Ridiculously, his palms were sweating, and his heart thudded in his chest. He was acting like a bloody schoolboy. But why? Why did Bunty want to meet him like this? *If it* was *Bunty*, murmured the voice of reason. He silenced it, wanting too badly to believe it was her and no one else. Likely it was the only way she thought they could meet. She must know as well as he did that no one would ever introduce him to her, and that smile, that sweet smile she had given him, surely a smile like that was a sign of encouragement? Wasn't it?

Finally, it was time. Ludo walked out of the ballroom, checking surreptitiously that he was not observed as he made his way to the library. He almost passed one of the Ratched sisters on the way. She was red-faced and looked furious, but did not see him, thank heavens. He lingered in a shadowed alcove as she rushed past. Ludo waited a moment longer, until he was certain no one was around, and then hurried on to the library, where he hesitated outside the door. *Please.* He sent up the prayer to a God he had largely ignored, and who had no reason to do him any favours, yet he opened the door and… there she was.

She swung around, her eyes growing wide as she stared at him.

The poor girl looked terrified. Likely she was having second thoughts about this mad scheme now. He could hardly blame her.

"Miss Bunting," he said, smiling and doing his best to look harmless. He closed the door behind him and moved into the room, noting that she moved the exact same distance away from him. "There's no need to be alarmed. I… I won't take advantage of the situation, you have my word. Only… I cannot pretend I wasn't surprised. Extremely pleased, but… surprised."

"S-Surprised?" she stammered, the word squeaked rather than spoken.

"By your note," he said gently. "The one that asked me to meet you here."

She gasped and grabbed hold of the chair she was standing beside, looking as if she might faint. “Oh, good heavens.”

Ludo rushed towards her and slid his arm about her waist before she collapsed.

“What are you doing?” she asked, looking more astonished than alarmed.

“I was afraid you might swoon.”

“I never swoon,” she retorted indignantly, and then panic filled her eyes. “Oh, oh no. Oh, Lord Courtenay, you must leave—”

Before another word could be spoken, the door burst open and the Ratched sisters appeared, with what appeared to be half of the guests in tow.

“Oh, Miss Bunting!” Sylvia shrieked dramatically. “Oh, and with… with him of *all* men!”

Ludo jolted. Good God. It was a trap. Felicity Bunting had trapped him into marrying her! He waited for the anger to hit him, the outrage and fury at being so manoeuvred.

It never came.

All he could think was… *she wants me*. Not for just a night. Not just for a bit of bed sport. She wanted to *marry* him. Why, he had no idea. God knew he was no catch. He had no fortune, no prospects, so that could only mean one thing.

She wanted *him*.

His breath caught and he almost laughed as he turned back to look at her, wanting to tell her yes, yes, he would marry her happily. Yet she did not look the least bit triumphant about her victory. She looked pale and horrified.

“I’m so terribly sorry. It was supposed to be Tommy,” she whispered, obviously mortified. “Not you.”

Ludo knew this was undoubtedly the most miserable night of his entire life and, bearing in mind the quality of options on offer, that was saying something. He’d reached a new low, and no mistake. Not only had Miss Bunting not intended to trap him into marriage, but she would ruin herself rather than marry him at all.

Well, he’d damn well see about that.

Her parents had ushered her away from the party, and from him, before he could speak two words to them, but he lost no time in discovering their address and following them home. He would marry

Felicity Bunting if it was the last thing he did. She had just ruined herself in front of the entire *ton*. She'd never get another offer. Like it or not, he was her best chance. Admittedly, that wasn't saying much, but it was the truth. He would give her the protection of his name and perhaps… perhaps in time….

He swallowed down the hope that rose in his chest and told himself not to be so bloody pitiful. Look where hope had gotten him this evening. He'd be a fool to expect anything good to come of this, except it already seemed he *was* a damned fool… for he wanted her too badly to let anything stand in his way.

Now, standing before her father in their front parlour, with Miss Bunting and her mother watching with frightened eyes from the other side of the room, he felt every bit the dastardly monster the *ton* had painted him. Not that he hadn't encouraged the rumours, but it was too late to lament.

He studied her as her father explained they would marry the day after tomorrow. She looked to be on the verge of tears and, despite everything, Ludo's heart went out to her. God alone knew what kind of man she believed him to be. She would have read the gossip sheets like everyone else; she would know of all his years of wickedness and vice. No doubt she thought she was marrying a vile fiend who would make her life a misery. Perhaps he *was* a vile fiend. He could not claim that all those stories had been untrue, for they each had some amount of truth in them, even if they'd been wildly exaggerated. Yet, he would try to be better. He would try to be a good man. Once Ludo had explained his situation, Miss Bunting's father had made no bones about his displeasure, pointing out that his daughter was getting a bad bargain indeed, but Ludo had spent the last year clearing his debts and trying to get his finances in order. He was in no position to provide for a wife, but he would try. He would find a way to give her a home. A home. The idea called to some place deep inside him he had buried years ago. He had not known what it was to have a home. Not since his mother had died, at least.

Miss Bunting had a reasonable dowry, more than anything he might have expected to gain through marriage, considering his prospects, but the idea of living off her money made his stomach clench, and shame rose in him like a tide. He would be better than that.

"Papa, do you think we might have a few moments alone together, please?"

Ludo looked up in surprise as he realised Miss Bunting had made the request. How brave she was. She was miserable and afraid, but she

would not shy away from him. Thank God for that.

Her father looked none too happy about it.

“Mr Bunting,” Ludo said, somewhat testy now. He was the one who’d been trapped, after all. “We shall soon be married, and I promise to act the gentleman. I do have a vague recollection of how to do so.”

Mr Bunting gave him a dark look filled with mistrust, but nodded his agreement and escorted his wife from the room.

Ludo’s heart began pounding again as he turned back to his fiancée. She swallowed hard and Ludo wondered if she might be sick.

“You must hate me,” she said, staring at her feet.

Ludo hesitated, wondering what to say to her. Honesty seemed the best idea, yet he was afraid to say too much, to let her see how badly he wanted this.

“I don’t hate you.”

She looked up at him then, her lovely brown eyes filled with sorrow. “How can you say that? I have ruined your life. I imagine the last thing you ever wanted was a wife, let alone… let alone one like me.”

That last bit was whispered, and she sounded so utterly defeated that his heart ached, but what on earth did she mean?

“One like you?” he repeated.

She got to her feet, her arms crossed around her waist.

“Don’t make me spell it out,” she said, irritated now, which was better than the awful sense that she’d been crushed, but he still did not understand.

“But I’m afraid I must, Miss Bunting. I do not know what you mean.”

“Bunty,” she corrected with an impatient huff before adding, “They call me Buxom Bunty, and that’s the nicest of my nicknames, I assure you. Fat Felicity is another.”

“Who said such a thing to you?” Ludo demanded, hearing the hurt in her voice and wanting to tear limb from limb whatever wretch had made her feel anything less than beautiful.

She gave him an odd look, as if he was being deliberately obtuse.

“Nigh on everybody,” she retorted. “It’s not as if it isn’t true.”

“The devil it is!”

Her eyes widened at his fierce response and he wondered why she

looked so surprised by it. Had no one ever defended her?

"There is no need to be polite for the sake of it, my lord. In fact, I should vastly prefer it if there were complete honesty between us. I have no expectation that… that you should give up your…." He could see her struggle for a polite way of framing her words. "*Pursuits*. I have trapped you into this, though I swear I did not intend to do so. I do not expect you to… to woo me."

"Yet, I find that I would like to, all the same."

She gasped, staring up at him with obvious suspicion. "B-But why?"

Ludo dared to move closer to her, encouraged when she didn't take to her heels, but watched him come to her. To his chagrin, he realised his hand was shaking as he raised it to touch her cheek, the back of his fingers sliding against satin.

"So beautiful," he said, reverence in his voice.

Her mouth fell open in shock and he could not resist. He lent down and kissed her. She didn't move so much as a muscle and, when he pulled away, she was still staring at him. He wasn't certain if it was shock or horror in her eyes, and took a hasty step back.

"May I call on you again tomorrow?"

She nodded, silent, still staring at him.

Ludo looked around as her father returned to the room.

"Until tomorrow, then," he said, bowing to her, and leaving her alone.



8th December 1820. London.

Bunty sat by the window, watching the road. Then she got up and paced for a bit. Then she ran back to the window and stared at the road a bit more.

"Do stop acting like such a ninny," she scolded herself, yet there didn't seem to be any choice in the matter. Not since he had kissed her.

For the hundredth time since that extraordinary event, she raised her fingers to her lips, tracing the place his mouth had been. It had been such a gentle kiss: tender, and not what she had expected of such a man. Well, she had not expected to be kissed at all. She had expected fury, disgust, and recriminations at having been so ill used. If she were perfectly honest, she had not expected him to pursue her. She assumed he would have been relieved that she would not hold

him to marrying her, and take to his heels. *It had to be the dowry*, said the sensible voice in her head, the one that would not let her get her hopes up. Her hopes had been crushed too many times for her to believe in them again, and yet….

He had said she was beautiful.

Why would he say such a thing to her? He had chosen to act the gentleman and marry her, and he would have her dowry. There was no need to woo her to secure her money. It would be his, to do with as he pleased, for Papa had warned her his finances were not what one would hope for. Not that she cared. If she could believe for a moment that he might like her, that he might even come to care for her, she would not pine for a fortune.

Who said such a thing to you?

The anger in his voice as he'd demanded who had insulted her had been a shock, too. It had been instantaneous, and she had believed it to be genuine. Yet it seemed so odd. Lord Courtenay was known to be seen in the company of all the most beautiful of the Cyprians. He might not have money, but he was so big, handsome, and obviously virile that even the exclusive highflyers sought him out. She could not make him out at all.

The sound of horses outside the door had her looking up, and there he was. He had sent a note earlier to inform her he would take her for a drive, and to wrap up warm. It was a bright, sunny winter's day, but still chilly, and Bunty had dressed in deep plum velvet carriage dress. Hoping she looked as well as she might, she snatched up her reticule and hurried to the front door.

"Miss Bunting," he said, giving her a formal bow. He paused, a slow smile curving over his mouth. "How lovely you look."

Bunty searched his face for any sign that he was mocking her, yet she found nothing but pleasure in his eyes. Heavens, she'd never seen eyes as blue as his before.

"Good day, my lord," she said, wishing she could still the erratic thumping of her heart.

She was being idiotic.

He offered her his arm and led her outside, where a smart yellow-and-black Phaeton awaited them. One of her father's footmen held the horses, two glossy bays who tossed their heads impatiently.

"How lovely," she said as he handed her up.

Lord Courtenay settled beside her, and Bunty felt a jolt of surprise as his strong thigh pressed against hers. He was a large man and took

up a deal of space. So large, in fact, that for the first time in her life, Bunty did not feel as though the rest of the world had been made in miniature. In comparison, she could almost believe herself dainty.

He nodded to the groom who released the horses. They set off at a smart trot and Bunty dared a glance at him, only to see he was regarding her in turn.

"I'm afraid they're not mine," he said, and she was struck by how awkward he appeared. "The horses and… all of it."

He shrugged his massive shoulders and Bunty's mouth went dry.

"I expect your father told you I'm no catch," he added, and there was a defensive note in his voice which surprised her.

"And yet," she said, "I've no doubt there are women a-plenty who would cut off their right arm to be sitting where I am."

He snorted in disgust. "No one like you, Miss Bunting."

She frowned at him and he shook his head, looking vaguely bewildered.

"You still don't believe me, do you?" he said. "You think I'm bamming you, flattering you for no good reason."

It was Bunty's turn to shrug, and she looked away, unable to hold his piercing gaze.

"Why would I do that?" he asked. "I did not have to marry you, I chose to. If I only wanted your money… well, it will soon be mine. What reason could I have to say such things to you?"

It was everything she had told herself, and it sounded so reasonable as he echoed her thoughts. Bunty forced herself to look back at him.

"Then perhaps it is simply that you are kind, my lord. I have often believed it of you. You always smiled at me with such… warmth, but I cannot believe you are content with this arrangement."

Something dark flashed in his eyes and she knew she was right. Oh well, better to have the truth unvarnished than live a lie. She tried to make herself believe that, but her heart ached all the same.

"No. I was not happy to discover it was not me you intended for your trap, but Lord Stanthorpe. Not that I could blame you for that."

Was that *regret* in his voice?

"Tommy is the best of fellows. Kind and funny and good-natured. Rich, too, and an earl, to boot. I don't suppose that hurts," he added bitterly.

Bunty gaped at him. Was he… jealous? No. That was utterly

ridiculous.

“But I didn’t mean to trap Tommy,” she said in a rush, her heart thudding even though she refused to believe what she was hearing.

He narrowed his eyes and her breath caught at being the object of his scrutiny. “Miss Bunting, you told me so yourself.”

“No!” Bunty shook her head. “Oh, you’ve got it all wrong.”

He was silent for a moment as he navigated a busy stretch of road, but then Hyde Park stretched before them, quiet now on a chill winter’s day.

“Well then, Miss Bunting,” he said, once he could return his attention to her. “I wish you would explain it to me.”

“Please, call me Bunty. Everyone does.”

He nodded but said nothing, and Bunty explained just what had happened last night. She told him of the Ratched sisters’ plans, of how she had warned Tommy and then gone back to confront Sylvia.

He was silent throughout her explanation until he drew up in a copse of trees, a secluded spot ideal for an illicit rendezvous. Bunty shifted nervously in her seat.

“So, in fact, you were not in the market for a husband at all,” he said, and she could not read his expression, nor his tone of voice.

She gave him the benefit of an exasperated look. “My lord, I am five and twenty. I have been in the market for a husband these last seven years and have simply failed to catch one. I was not, however, so desperate as to stoop to trickery and subterfuge.”

He stared at her for a long moment, that blue gaze studying her so thoroughly she had to fight to hold it. At length, he sighed, and looked so dejected Bunty wanted to reach out and take his hand. She folded her own in her lap.

“So, you set no trap. You were acting honourably, saving a friend from disaster, and facing down his enemy for him. Tommy is lucky indeed to have you on his side. You are brave and bold, Miss Bunting.”

Bunty blushed, unused to hearing herself described in such a light. “Nonsense. Anyone would have done the same.”

He gave a little huff of amusement. “No. They would not, and that you could still believe that shows exactly the kind of person you are.”

“A fool, you mean,” she said tightly, quite used to her parents telling her she was too naïve, too willing to look for the good in people who would end up using her for their own ends.

“No!” he exclaimed, his dark brows pulling together. He shifted on the seat, turning towards her, which pressed his knee harder against hers. “Not that. Never a fool, Bunty.”

Bunty stared at him, unable to work this strange creature out. What did he want from her, this beautiful man who looked like a god, who was supposed to be wicked and wild? He was meant to be the worst kind of rake, and yet had such kindness in his eyes, and he was looking at her now like… like….

“Bunty,” he said, his voice low.

“Y-Yes?”

“I should like to kiss you.”

“Oh.”

Bunty’s heart gave an odd little kick in her chest and she felt an awful blush creep up her chest, up her neck, heating her face. Good lord, she must be scarlet by now. How dreadfully unattractive and gauche. He grinned at her and reached out, touching her cheek.

“Such a pretty colour,” he murmured. “I love that you blush so easily. I wish I could see where the colour begins.”

“My lord!” she exclaimed, wondering why she wasn’t cross with him for having said such a thing, but she was not. Shocked, yes, but not a bit cross.

“I’m sorry,” he said, the sheepish look he gave her quite adorable, even though wickedness still glinted in his eyes. “I know I ought not say such things, but I’ve never been good at dissembling, at saying the right thing, the polite thing. I’m not polite at all, but I suppose you know that.”

“Not in the least,” Bunty replied, wishing she did not sound so breathless, but his fingers were still caressing her cheek. She had the urgent desire to lean into his touch, like a cat. Good heavens. “As I said, you were always kind. Unlike many of your ilk.”

“In what way was I kind?”

His fingers trailed along the line of her jaw, down her neck, and Bunty shivered.

“You never ignored me. You smiled at me, and not in a mocking way, but like we might be friends if we were introduced. I appreciated that more than you’ll know.”

“Bunty,” he said, and the way he said her name, all soft and low, made her breath catch in her throat. She looked up at him, struck by the way his eyes had darkened. “That wasn’t kindness, love. I have so wanted someone to introduce us, but no one would let a devil like me

near such a prize. The only way I could be near you was to fall into a trap set for another, but perhaps it was fate."

A prize? Bunty's mind had grown fuzzy at his proximity. He was leaning closer to her and his scent filled her mind. He smelled of clean linen, soap, and something male and musky that made her insides tremble with longing. She could hardly comprehend what he was saying. Her brain had fallen into a swoon when he'd said her name so softly, and it showed no signs of reviving.

"May I kiss you now?"

"K-Kiss?" she murmured hazily, blinking at him.

His mouth was so close to hers, his full lips sensuous, and the urge to press her mouth to his was overwhelming. So she did. His lips were soft and warm and… oh good heavens. She'd kissed him!

She drew back with a gasp, covering her mouth with her hand.

"*Oh!*" she said in horror. Good God, what would he think of her now? That she was a brazen hussy, most likely. Mortified, she lifted her gaze to find him looking down at her in amusement.

"Well, don't stop there," he said, one large hand moving to her waist. He leaned in again and nuzzled at her cheek, his voice a delicious whisper against her skin. "Do it again."

Bunty swallowed, wondering if she dared.

"*Please*," he added.

Well, how could she resist when he asked so nicely?

His mouth was so close she only had to move a little and their lips touched again. Bunty let out a shaky breath, overwhelmed by how sweet it felt to kiss him. She pressed a little firmer and withdrew and he only watched her, saying nothing, not moving. Bunty kissed him again, a soft press of lips, followed by another, and another, and oh, it was lovely but… she wanted more.

"I don't know what I'm doing," she admitted.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and she was struck by how dark his eyes had grown, the black swamping the blue. His voice was low and breathless too, and he licked his lips, as though tasting hers.

Bunty's own breath hitched. "Sure about what?"

"That you don't know what you're doing. It seems to me that you are quite adept."

Bunty frowned, uncertain if he was sincere.

"Don't tease me," she said quietly. "I know there must be far more."

“I wasn’t teasing, but yes… there’s more.”

“Show me, then.”

No doubt she was an unattractive shade of puce by now, but there was nothing to be done about that. Besides, he’d said he liked her blush. Strange man.

“With pleasure.”

Bunty gasped as he took her in his arms and held her close before his mouth covered hers. His kisses were nothing like hers had been. There was nothing shy or tentative about the way his mouth sought hers, or the way his tongue traced the seam of her mouth. *His tongue!* Bunty gasped and went to pull back, but he held her there, his tongue invading her mouth and stroking and… pleasure rolled through her. The day was cold, and their secluded spot out of the sun chillier still, yet Bunty was burning up. A slow fire had begun low in her belly and melted everything it touched until her bones were molten and everything beneath her flesh simmered. She was pliant in his arms, willing to go where he led, willing to do almost anything to keep the delicious liquid heat spilling through her body. His hand moved over her, up from her waist, moving slowly higher as Bunty’s pounding heart reached a crescendo. She held her breath as he carried on higher still to cup her full breast. He caressed and gently squeezed, and even through all the layers of material the sensation was incredible. Bunty moaned with pleasure.

“Christ,” he murmured, eyes wide as he broke the kiss.

Bunty was slammed back to reality in an instant.

Good God, what was wrong with her? She’d let him ravish her in the middle of Hyde Park, and would have allowed him a great many more liberties if he hadn’t stopped. Where were all the lessons her mother had taught her? *Gone.* Burned away in the passion he had made her feel. No wonder he was considered so bloody dangerous.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, wanting to die. “I don’t know what c-came over me….”

“Sorry?” he repeated, obviously perplexed, and she thought perhaps a little annoyed too. “What the devil are you sorry for?”

Bunty hesitated. “N-Nice girls aren’t supposed to behave like that.”

He let out a sigh and reached for her, cupping her cheek. “You’re the nicest girl I have ever met, and I loved every minute of it. Please don’t regret it, but I suppose I had better take you home. We’re not married yet.”

“Why?”

Lord Courtenay frowned at her. “Why what?”

“Why are you marrying me?”

He hesitated and Bunty held her breath, for once in her life allowing herself to hope for a man to say something that did not make her feel unattractive and unwanted. He turned and looked at her, his expression intent.

“Not for your dowry, if that’s what you’re wondering. I’m not marrying you because I must, and I’m not marrying you for your money. I swear upon my honour, for whatever that tarnished article may be worth to you.”

Bunty smiled at him. It wasn’t exactly a romantic declaration, but it was more than she’d dared hope for. “I think your honour is a most valuable thing, my lord.”

He stared at her, something in his eyes that she could not read.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “And it’s not ‘my lord.’ Not anymore. I should like you to call me Ludo.”

Chapter 3

"Wherein Lord Courtenay takes a wife."



8th December 1820. London.

Ludo stared around his rented rooms, trying to see through the eyes of a gently raised young woman who had been bred for greater things than this blasted hovel.

Hell and damnation.

Oh God, what had he done? She would take one look at this dump and walk straight out again. He could take her to a hotel for their wedding night, but… but this would still await them the next day. She'd see then exactly what a pitiful excuse for a man she'd married. She hadn't realised yet, the poor girl. For the moment, his looks had charmed her, just as they'd charmed so many other women before her. They ought to be good for something, he thought bitterly, after having ruined his life in every other way. The Courtenay family were all fair-haired, with green or hazel eyes. His father and his two older brothers fitted the mould perfectly: medium height, medium build, sandy hair, fair skin and green eyes. And then there was Ludo. Standing well over six feet, he was built like an ox, with hair the colour of midnight, skin that spoke of Mediterranean climes, and eyes of bright blue.

A cuckoo in the nest if ever there was one.

In the days before she'd died, his mother had told him his father had been an Italian count. The handsomest man she had ever met. Her lover had wanted her to run away with him, but she had not wanted Ludo to live with the ensuing scandal. God, how he wished his mother *had* run, and taken him with her. It could not possibly have been worse.

Ludo reached down, picked up an empty brandy bottle and set it on the mantel. He was getting married tomorrow. This would not do. He needed help.

An hour later, he returned to his rooms with three of his favourite ladies from the brothel around the corner. They had not been best pleased at being woken during daylight hours, but the promise of being paid double their usual rate—and the lure of one of their favourite customers—had got them moving.

"Well then, lover," Jenny said, pressing herself against him with a suggestive smile. "What's got you all riled up, then? Three of us going

to be enough, is it? He's in the mood for some sport, I reckon, girls."

The other two women giggled, and Ludo sighed, hoping they would not hate him for asking for their help.

"No sport, Jen. I'm sorry. The truth is, I'm getting married tomorrow."

They stared at him.

"Oh!" Sarah said, her face clearing. "He wants to sow the last of his wild oats."

"Bleedin' 'ell," Rachel crowed. "I don't reckon 'e's got none left!"

The three of them fell about laughing and Ludo sighed, unhooking Jenny's arms from his neck.

"No, no. You've got it all wrong. Please, ladies. I need your help. I'd not ask otherwise. I'm getting married and the poor girl is getting a wretched bargain as it is, without… without bringing her back to… to this…." He gestured about him in despair. "I know I'm a devil for asking it of you, but please? Help me make it look a bit less…."

"Like a tomcat's hideaway?" Jenny suggested, raising one eyebrow.

"Exactly," Ludo replied, relieved.

Jenny tutted at him and folded her arms. "Not sure we ought to help him, girls, not if it means he's going to be a proper husband and mend his ways."

Rachel snorted. "When did gettin' married ever stop a bloke from having his fun? Won't change nothin'."

Jenny studied Ludo for a long moment, and he felt a wave of heat burn up the back of his neck. "Nah. Ludo's a good 'un," she said softly. "If he says his vows, they'll mean summat. Won't they, love?"

Ludo nodded, something in his chest constricting at being read so easily, when he'd hardly dared acknowledge the truth himself.

"She a nice girl?" Jenny asked, smiling at him.

Ludo nodded. "Better than I deserve, Jen."

"Ah, come on then, ladies. Roll your sleeves up. Let's help the poor sod get his house in order."

"Do we get summat for our trouble when it's done, eh?" Sarah asked him, moving close enough to run her hand over his chest and down to more intimate areas.

Ludo caught hold of her wrist and raised her hand to his lips, kissing her fingers. "A generous purse and my undying gratitude, Sarah."

The girl heaved a sigh and rolled her eyes. “Ah, well. As you like, handsome.”

By late afternoon, Ludo’s rooms had been thoroughly cleaned and aired, fresh sheets put on the bed, and an embarrassing number of empty bottles disposed of. Once the girls had gone, each of them in possession of a generous sum for their troubles, Ludo had headed out to buy a wedding ring. A simple gold band was all he could afford, but his hopes rose exponentially on seeing the ring tucked into its little red box. A new beginning, he promised himself. On the way back, he’d noticed a flower seller, her basket crammed full of Christmas roses. He made the girl’s day by buying the entire basketful. It would be an excellent way of brightening up his less than elegant abode and, besides which, the flowers made him think of Bunty.

Ludo stared down at the large bouquet in his hand and laughed as he walked home. This was his last night as a bachelor. No doubt he ought to be out drinking with his friends and making the most of his freedom. He couldn’t think of anything he wanted to do less. He had caroused and debauched his way through life since he was a very young man, and now that was done. Now he would have a wife, someone to come home to, someone who gave a damn if *he* came home.

She *would* give a damn, wouldn’t she?

Bunty was everything good in life. She was kind and brave and clever and… and she would give him a chance. He ran up the steps to the front door and let himself back into his rooms, feeling his heart sink to his boots as he realised no amount of cleaning and tidying would turn them into the kind of place Bunty would expect to live in —like a house in Mayfair.

Oh, God. She would hate him.



“Bunty, darling. I’ve been thinking. We were too hasty. You need not go through with it,” her father said.

Bunty looked around from her sentry position by the front window to see her parents standing side by side.

“What?” she asked, a little irritated to have her attention taken from watching the road.

Lord Courtenay—Ludo — should be here soon. They were to be married at two o’clock. Her father had arranged the special licence and the minister was seated in the back parlour with a cup of tea whilst he awaited the arrival of her bridegroom.

“I did a little investigating about Lord Courtenay at my club yesterday, and the reports are far from good. Worse than we had realised, even. Your mother and I have been talking and… oh, Bunty. My dear child, we cannot help but think that in such circumstances, ruination might be better than marriage to… to such a man.”

Bunty’s eyes grew wide as she realised her father was in earnest.

“But, Father, I should be shunned by polite society. What would I do? Where would I go?”

“We thought perhaps your Great-Aunt Hildebrand,” her mother said, her voice quavering. “She lives very quietly, no one there would know you, or would know about….”

She sobbed and buried her face in her handkerchief.

“You think I would be better served living with an old lady of eighty in the wilds of Cumbria than marrying Lord Courtenay?” Bunty replied, astonished and horrified.

“If it were any other man, my dear.” Her father’s eyes were filled with pity. “But Courtenay… Everyone knows he’s a bastard, for all his father was duped into acknowledging him. He was disowned by his family, and he’s raised hell at every opportunity since. He’ll likely squander your fortune and subject you to heaven alone knows what indignities. He has no money, no prospects. What can you hope to gain by marrying him?”

“But it’s all arranged,” Bunty protested. “You went and got the licence; you agreed the terms with him. You cannot change your mind now.”

“No,” her father said, his voice firm. “But *you* can, and no one would think less of you for not marrying such a man.”

Bunty stared at her father. She knew everything he’d said was likely true. It was impossible to deny the accusations against Ludo. The scandals were legion, his reputation blacker than pitch. *Leopards don’t change their spots*, whispered a little voice in her head.

Her breath caught as she heard the front door close and, a moment later, the butler announced him. Bunty’s heart thudded as Ludo appeared in the doorway. Oh, but he was magnificent. His powerful thighs were clad in buff breeches, the embroidered cream waistcoat and dark blue coat exquisitely cut, highlighting his impressive physique. Bunty could not draw a breath at all as he bowed low to them and then moved towards her, smiling with such warmth that she wanted to cry.

“Miss Bunting,” he said, a look in his eyes that was just for her as he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “How lovely you look. I am

the most fortunate of men."

Tears stung her eyes as she realised he was sincere. He truly thought her lovely.

"My lord." Bunty jumped at the force of her father's voice. "We have spoken with our daughter, and there has been a change of plan. There is something she would like to say to you."

Ludo stiffened, looking from her father back to her. Bunty flushed, horrified and uncertain of what to say, until she saw the hurt in his eyes. It was only there for a moment before his expression was wiped clean. He stood tall and did not meet her gaze.

"Of course," he said, with no inflection in his voice. "I quite understand. There is no need to distress yourself, Miss Bunting. I believe I know what you wish to say."

He bowed, stiff and formal, and turned away from her.

Panic gripped Bunty at the terrible idea she might lose her chance to know this man better, to know more of the tender soul who had kissed her as if she was everything he'd ever wanted, who had told her she was lovely and actually meant it. She reached out and grasped his arm.

"Wait!"

He stilled utterly, but did not turn back to her.

"Is that it?" she said, hearing her voice trembling. "You've nothing to say, no argument to make?"

Slowly, he lifted his eyes to hers, and she was drowning in all that lovely blue.

"What can I say, Miss Bunting? I knew from the first it was too good to be true. It was just a lovely daydream. Nothing more."

He went to move away again, but she held on tighter.

"No. I do *not* release you from your promise. Either you marry me or… or I shall s-sue you for breach of promise."

"Bunty!" exclaimed her father in horror as her mother shrieked and collapsed back onto the sofa.

Bunty ignored them both, her eyes fixed on Lord Courtenay, but his expression was unreadable.

"I do not release you," she said again. "The minister is waiting for us."

He moved closer to her and took both of her hands in his, though he did not meet her eyes as he spoke, looking down at his feet instead, as if ashamed.

“Your parents are right to warn you off. Everything they say is true, no doubt.”

“I know of your reputation,” she said quietly. “I know of all the stories in the scandal sheets, but is that all there is to you? Is there not more?”

He did not answer, still avoiding her eyes, but Bunty pressed on.

“Will you be cruel to me, my lord? Will you gamble away my money and spend it on other women? Will you leave me alone and destitute when it is gone?”

“What? *No*!” he exclaimed, his blue eyes flashing. “God, no. I would never… *never*…” His voice cracked and he snapped his jaw shut and simply shook his head, his eyes still burning with anger.

Bunty smiled at him, knowing her instincts had guided her right. “I would like to get married now, Ludo. If… If you still wish to marry me, that is?”

“If I wish to?” he repeated, looking astonished, and then he let out a harsh breath. “I should like that above all things, Miss Bunting.”

“Bunty,” she corrected him gently.

“Bunty,” he said, staring at her in such a way she blushed and looked away from him.

“Well,” she said, trying not to sound as if she was trembling all over. “Let us not keep the minister waiting any longer.”

Ludo was married. It was the most extraordinary thing. Any moment now he’d wake up. He waited on the front step for his wife to bid goodbye to her mama, who was weeping as if her only daughter was about to climb the steps at Tyburn. He could hardly blame the poor woman. If he ever had a daughter, and a bastard like him wanted to court her, he’d have the devil put on the first ship to New South Wales without a second thought. That he now had a wife, and might one day have a daughter too, hit him like a hammer blow. A family. He might have a family. Well, it was bound to happen, wasn’t it? Sooner or later, and he would have to provide for them.

At least he’d cleared all his debts, he assured himself, as a hot, panicky sensation rose in his chest. It wasn’t beyond the bounds of possibility that the business he’d begun would bring him a profit, too. His schoolmasters had not written him off, after all; they’d said he had a brain in his head. He’d done rather well, actually. Better than his brothers, not that it had done him the least bit of good. In fact, he thought his father—well, not *his* father, but his mother’s husband—

had hated him all the more for that.

At last the tearful farewells were done and Bunty joined him, taking his arm as he led her to the hired carriage. Ludo ignored her father's wrathful gaze as he guided the man's daughter down the stairs and handed her inside. One day, he promised himself, one day he would provide her with a carriage and four perfectly matched horses, she would have the finest clothes, a house on Mayfair, and whatever else she desired. He'd sell his soul to the devil himself if he must, but one way or another he would give her the life she deserved for being so brave, so bloody mad as to give herself into his keeping.

Ludo climbed in after his bride and closed the carriage door. All at once silence reigned as the carriage rocked into motion. He dared a glance at her to see her staring resolutely straight ahead. God, the poor thing must be terrified. He only hoped she wasn't already regretting her rash decision, for she'd not even seen where she would be living yet.

He gathered his courage and reached out to take her hand, relieved when she curled her fingers quite naturally about his.

"Lady Courtenay," he said, a little stunned to realise such a creature existed.

She laughed, a soft breathy sound that made his heart skip about in his chest like a newborn lamb.

"That will take some getting used to," she said.

"Why did you do it?" he asked, hardly daring to hear the answer.

Perhaps her father was a cruel tyrant who beat her, and he was her only means of escaping. It seemed the only rational explanation.

She bit her full lower lip, worrying at it and sending desire lancing through him like a lightning strike as he fought the need to kiss the reddened flesh better.

"The truth," he urged her, telling himself he had best know the worst now, before he had fallen any farther under her spell.

She looked up at him and he stared down into eyes of the softest brown, flecked with gold, bronze, copper. *Idiot.* He had no farther to fall. He was utterly spellbound.

"I believe in you," she said, and then laughed again, though he liked this sound rather less than before. "My parents think I am quite mad, but… but I told them I believed you were a good man, that you would try your best to be a good husband to me."

Ludo stared at her in awe. "You said that? Out *loud*?"

"Of course out loud," she said, giving him an odd look. "Else how

would they have heard me?"

"They're right." He reached out and caressed her cheek. "You are quite mad."

She stiffened, and he hurried on before he made a mull of it all.

"But you were right, too, at least… I have not been a good man, Bunty, but I will do better. I have no idea how to be a husband either, but I shall try."

He winced, wondering how he had ever been considered an eloquent ladies' man. The skill seemed to have been lost to him the moment he found himself alone in the library with this astonishing woman. Had that really only been two days ago?

To his delight she reached up, covered the hand at her cheek with her own, and turned into it, kissing his gloved palm and then blushing furiously. He wanted badly to pull her into his arms and kiss her, here and now, but he did not dare. The likelihood of getting carried away was too strong, and he would not embarrass her for the world. So, he did nothing more than hold her hand for the rest of the journey until they arrived outside of his front door.

The humiliation of guiding her into his bachelor accommodation was worse than he'd expected, and his expectations had been pretty bloody low. His stomach clenched to see her in such a place. It was like taking a flawless diamond and throwing it down in the dirt. So when she turned and smiled at him with delight in her eyes, he was quite lost for words.

"You bought flowers," she said, moving to where he'd arranged them in whatever jugs and empty glasses he could find, and set them around the room. She touched her gloved finger to the white petals, and Ludo ached for her to touch him with such obvious pleasure.

"They're Christmas roses," he said. "They reminded me of you."

She looked up at once, staring at him.

"They did?" she asked, obviously sceptical. "Why?"

He shrugged, feeling strangely self-conscious. He'd flattered and seduced women enough in his day, but he'd never given his heart with the words before. It was surprisingly daunting, making him feel vulnerable and exposed. "They're perfect. They look beautiful and delicate, innocent, but they are strong and brave enough to bloom in the harshest of winters."

Her mouth formed a little 'o' of surprise and she blinked, her eyes glittering brightly.

"That… That is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me," she

whispered.

"It's the truth."

She stared at him a moment longer before returning her attention to the room. Her gaze fell upon two framed watercolours, and Ludo felt anxiety prickle down his back.

"Oh, these are lovely. So cleverly painted. Where did you get them?"

"Um…."

She turned to look at him. "Do you know the artist?"

"Y-Yes," he hedged.

"They're marvellous. Look at the candlelight burning indoors, shining through the windows of that beautiful house, and the way the twilight is making the skies all dim and yet glowing outside. You can almost feel the chill of autumn in the air and you know the fire inside is warm and cosy. It looks just the sort of place one would wish to live, as if nothing bad could ever happen there."

Ludo allowed that comment to unfurl inside him with a burst of pleasure, but said nothing, uncertain of how she would feel about his love of painting. It was suited to young ladies and maiden aunts, but was not a manly pursuit. That point had been hammered home early on, his family having made their feeling about his ambitions to be an artist abundantly clear.

"And you have a meal ready for us, too."

Ludo watched as she uncovered the dishes and inspected the cold supper he'd had provided by his landlady.

"It looks splendid," she said, smiling at him as she removed her bonnet and gloves.

"Are you hungry now?" he asked, wondering why he was asking such stupid questions when all he wanted was to take her to bed.

To his great relief, she shook her head, then set the hat and gloves aside and unbuttoned her pelisse.

"I'm too nervous to eat. And I don't say that very often," she admitted, with a self-deprecating laugh that sounded a touch brittle. She laid her coat on a chair and clutched her arms about her stomach, blushing before looking away from him.

She was nervous, he realised. Well, of course she was. This was her wedding night, and… Holy God, she was a virgin. Not that he hadn't known that. Of course he'd *known* that, but… but he hadn't really considered that… that she'd never… that no one had ever….

He'd be the first.

Damn that, he'd be her *only*.

Oh, Lord, what if he hurt her?

What if she *cried*?

Panic gripped him.

"Perhaps some champagne, then?" he suggested, darting from the room the moment she nodded. Ludo hurried through the bedroom and flung open the window to retrieve the champagne bottle he'd left there to chill. He slammed the window shut again before the room grew cold, but a merry fire blazed in the hearth and it was warm and welcoming. He eyed the bed with misgiving.

Don't be a bloody fool, he cursed. *Anyone would think* you *were a bloody virgin*.

Idiotically, he wished that he was. He wished he could redo the past and make it so he wasn't the man he'd become, but then he'd never have met her. *Stop it*, he scolded himself, clutching at the cork of the champagne bottle. *Have a drink and calm down, for the love of God*.

"What a cosy room."

Ludo leapt from his skin as he heard Bunty enter the room, and the cork flew from the bottle with a resounding *pop*.

Champagne gushed from the neck and Bunty gave a laugh and snatched up the glasses he'd left on the dresser, placing first one then the other beneath the torrent. Well, he hoped that was the last of the humiliations in store for him this evening and not an omen. If not, he'd best just throw himself from the window and have done with it.

"And you call yourself a rake," he muttered crossly.

"Pardon?"

"Would you like some cake?" he said in a rush, improvising wildly and hoping to God there was some.

"No, thank you, this is splendid," she said, raising the glass.

Ludo watched, fascinated, as she licked her lips, and everything south of his navel grew taut.

Oh, God.

Please let him get through this night without making her cry or shaming himself.

He only prayed that some forgiving deity was listening with a kindly ear and did not seek to make an example of him. Well, in that case… it looked like he was on his own.

Chapter 4

"Wherein… a wedding night."



9th December 1820. London.

Bunty looked up to find Ludo watching her intently. Their eyes met and he cleared his throat, turning away and going to the fireplace to stoke the fire which was burning merrily and did not appear to need his attention. She frowned. If she didn't know better, she would have said he was nervous.

Pffft. Nervous?

Lustful Ludo the Libertine?

Hardly.

Yet she did not know how else to account for his behaviour. Unless, of course, he didn't desire her? The thought made her stomach clench. *Oh*. She'd just assumed, after the way he'd kissed her, that… but perhaps bedding someone was another thing entirely. Or perhaps he'd gone off the idea, or….

"What's wrong?"

Bunty jolted, a little alarmed to discover he was standing so close to her.

"N-Nothing," she stammered, and then changed her mind. If this marriage was going to have the slightest chance of succeeding, they must be honest with each other. "Well, actually, there is something…."

His face fell and he looked so utterly dejected she wished she'd kept her blasted mouth shut.

"I know it's awful," he said, one large hand raking through his hair and making it stick up all over the place. "I tried my best to make it presentable, but no amount of flowers and champagne will ever turn this hovel into a palace, I'm afraid."

"What?" She stared at him for a moment before she realised what he was talking about. "Oh, no, it's not that. Your rooms are charming."

He snorted with disgust.

"For a bachelor, certainly." He moved closer and took her by the shoulders. "I will do better for you, Bunty. I swear I will."

“Please don’t worry. After all, there is my dowry now, and—”

Ludo shook his head, his mouth set in a firm line. “No.”

“No?” She frowned at him, puzzled by the resistance in his voice.

“I’ll… I’ll find a way myself. That money is yours, to use as you see fit.”

Bunty gaped, bewildered. “But I don’t need a sum like that! Though, that you would give me access to it is… is more than I expected. Thank you, Ludo.”

“Christ, you would thank me? For forcing you to live in this….” He gestured around him with a muttered curse and turned his back on her. “I suppose I ought to use your money to buy us somewhere decent to live, for your sake at least, but… but I want to do it by myself. God, I’m a selfish bastard.”

Bunty smiled, understanding his dilemma. A man’s pride was a fragile thing. Her mother had taught her that much.

“I am perfectly content to live here while you get things in order, Ludo. It is no hardship, I assure you.”

Bunty had come from a well-run, elegant house, and she had never lacked any comfort, but she did not think life in these rather shabby rooms was enough to daunt her. Not if Ludo genuinely wanted her with him, but that brought her back to her original point.

“You are too kind,” he said.

She could not decipher his tone so she moved closer so she could see his face.

“Ludo?”

He turned towards her, and Bunty gathered her courage.

“D-Don’t… don’t you want me?”

She watched him blink, such an incredulous expression on his face she might have laughed if she’d not been so anxious.

“What?”

“Oh,” she said, twisting her hands together. “Don’t make me say it again. It’s only… I thought before that… that you did, and you said I was lovely, and I… well, I believed you, which was probably foolish of me, but… but if you meant it, why… w-why haven’t you kissed me yet?”

“God,” he said with feeling. “I’m a stupid bastard as well as a selfish one. What a catch you are, Ludo.”

Bunty’s eyes grew wide at his language, but she said nothing as he was moving closer, putting his arms around her, pulling her close.

“Not want you?” he said on a breath of laughter. “How could you think such a thing?”

“Well.” Bunty licked her lips, trying and failing not to stare at his mouth. “You seemed so nervous, and I thought perhaps you didn’t want to, or that you’d changed your mind.”

Ludo groaned and pressed his forehead gently against hers.

“Forgive me. I’m such a fool, it’s only….”

“Only?” she pressed as he paused, looking embarrassed.

“It’s only I wanted everything to be perfect, but I have to bring you here to this wretched place and you must surely regret agreeing to marry me, and then I realised that you’d never… that you hadn’t…. That you were a virgin, and I’m worried because I don’t want to hurt you, and….” He huffed out a bitter laugh. “You’d think the one thing I could do with no trouble was take you to bed, but no, I’m a bundle of nerves and I can’t even get that right.”

“Oh.” Bunty reached up and cupped his beautiful face, joy bubbling through her blood like the champagne bottle had burst inside her veins. “You wanted to make me happy.”

He nodded.

“Ludo?”

“Yes,” he said cautiously.

“I’m so very glad I married you.”

“You are?”

Bunty nodded. “I think I made a wise choice, and I believe that everyone will see that one day, but I don’t care how long it takes, as long as you are glad too?”

“Bunty,” he whispered. “Oh, God, love. I’ve never been gladder of anything in my whole life.”

She laughed then. “How foolish we both are. From now on we must speak our minds and not fret about what each other is thinking, but ask. Don’t you agree?”

A slightly wicked glint lit his eyes, but he nodded.

“I do,” he said. “Why don’t you do that, then?”

“Do what?”

“Ask me what I’m thinking.”

Bunty swallowed, a little daunted now, but determined not to be silly. “W-What are you thinking, Ludo?”

He leaned in and nipped at her earlobe, making her gasp, and then

whispered in her ear. “I’m thinking I should like you to take your clothes off now.”

Bunty blushed as an odd mixture of anxiety and excitement coiled low in her belly.

“Oh.”

“Mmmm,” he murmured, kissing a path down her neck before returning to nuzzle the tender spot beneath her ear. “I want to unwrap my prize.”

“I thought you were nervous.”

“I’m putting up a heroic fight.”

“Oh. Well, go on, then,” she said, aware that she was breathless but impressed she’d got the words out at all.

He took a step back and grinned at her before turning her around. She felt the brush of his fingers against the nape of her neck as he worked each fastening in turn and shivered. What clever fingers he had. He was far quicker than her maid, she thought, as her dress slithered to the ground. Bunty closed her eyes and wished she were slender. If only she’d known she was to marry such a man, she could have at least tried to lose weight, not that it had ever worked before. Oh well, it was too late now. She only hoped he wasn’t expecting too much. With a gasp, she realised he had worked even faster than she’d anticipated. She was clad only in her stockings and chemise, and Ludo was turning her back to face him. Panic struck her. She clutched her arms about her middle, wanting to hide as much of herself as possible. He would not allow that, though. He undid the tie of the chemise and gently moved her arms aside, before pushing the flimsy material down to join the rest of her clothes.

Bunty squeezed her eyes closed with mortification and prayed he was not disappointed.



Holy God and all his angels

Ludo let out a ragged breath as he stared at his wife in wonder. *You lucky bastard, Ludo.* He had no idea what the devil he’d done to earn this astonishing gift, surely nothing in this lifetime, but he swore he’d do whatever it took to be worthy of it.

He could hardly breathe. He longed to touch her but felt he ought not, as if it wasn’t his right, yet he was her husband. She was his wife. *His wife!* He blinked hard as a sudden surge of emotion caught him off guard.

“Ludo?”

He looked up, to discover Bunty peering at him from between her fingers.

"Yes, love?"

"I'm trying hard not to jump to the conclusion that you don't want to touch me, b-but what is taking so long?"

Ludo let out a bark of laughter and then forced his expression into something more solemn as she glared at him in outrage.

"Forgive me," he said, his voice low and gravelly as desire thrummed through him. "I was so overwhelmed by my own good fortune, I could do nothing but stare. My God, Bunty, how lovely you are. I cannot help but fear I shall wake up in the morning and discover the whole thing has been a dream."

She gave him a sceptical glance and wrapped her arms about herself again, a gesture he was recognising as a habit, and thoroughly disliked. He moved closer and took each wrist in turn, moving her arms aside, allowing him to stare down at a delicious landscape of full breasts and luscious curves. His mouth watered.

"Don't you dare try to hide from me, wife." He released her wrists in favour of cupping her breasts and groaned as the plump weight filled his hands, heavy and ripe. "I do not understand how such a thing is possible, when everyone was so certain I'd go to the fiery pits, but I've died and gone to heaven."

"Don't be silly," she said, laughing, though it was a nervous sound.

Ludo looked at her curiously. "You have no idea, do you? You don't have the faintest idea what the sight of you does to me?"

She shook her head and Ludo smiled. "That's all right, love. I'll show you, but I tell you now, I've seen nothing as lovely as you in my whole life."

That he'd seen more than his fair share was something he didn't mention. He did not doubt that she knew it.

Ludo kissed her then, delighted at her eager response, that she remembered everything he'd taught her as she opened her mouth, her tongue seeking his. He kissed her until she was breathless and trembling, unable to still his wandering hands from exploring the silky skin exposed for his pleasure. Working his way down her body, he kissed her neck and shoulder, working lower with as much patience as he could muster until his hands and mouth found her breasts. He sighed happily.

She gave a little squeak of surprise as his mouth closed over her, suckling at her breast with enthusiasm before moving to the other and

lavishing the same attention there.

"Oh," she said, a wondering sound as her hands rested tentatively upon his hair.

"So sweet, Bunty," he murmured against her skin. "I just know you'll be even sweeter elsewhere."

He got to his knees, pressing kisses over the soft swell of her belly and hips, moving lower as her eyes widened and her breathing grew fast. She gasped and squealed as he wriggled his tongue into her belly button and then laughed and he sat back on his heels to grin at her.

"I love to hear you laugh."

"Really?" she asked doubtfully. "Is it *appropriate* at such a moment? I always thought… well… this was supposed to be serious, solemn."

Ludo pressed a kiss to her belly.

"Sometimes, yes," he said, savouring the feel of her skin against his cheek. "But there ought to be playfulness, too: fun, and pleasure above all things."

He held her gaze and moved lower, kissing the sensitive skin at the apex of her thighs. Her breathing hitched as he moved again, nuzzling the silky curls before parting the delicate folds that hid the little pearl of flesh he sought. With a sigh of pleasure he kissed her there, before teasing his tongue between the folds. She gasped and clutched at his hair.

"Oh! Oh, my."

Ludo chuckled and settled to his work, licking and teasing until she was squirming, and he was forced to hold her still.

"Oh, it was all true," she murmured, though now she held him in place, her beautiful skin flushed with pleasure. "You are a bad, bad man. Dreadful. Utterly wicked…."

"Yes, love, and all yours now," he murmured before looking up at her, dazed with his good fortune.

"All mine?" she repeated, as if she had doubted it.

Ludo frowned and got to his feet. "I meant what I said, love. Forsaking all others."

A slow smile curved over her mouth and she flung herself at him, holding him tightly. Ludo savoured the moment, happy and a little bewildered that she had not expected at least that much from him. What a bad bargain she had been willing to strike. He could not comprehend why she would take such a chance, for she was not so foolish as to be dazzled by a pretty face alone. Well, whatever her

reasons, he would do his best, in all things, which reminded him….

He reached down and swept her up, laughing at the incredulity in her eyes as he lifted her with ease.

"Goodness, you're strong."

Ludo snorted. "You're a featherweight, love."

She made an incredulous sound. "Oh, what a plumper. I certainly am not anything of the sort."

He tsked with impatience and set her down carefully on the bed, leaning over her. "I don't know what kind of maggoty ideas you have in that head of yours. Though I suppose I ought to expect such nonsense from someone hen-witted enough to marry me, of all people, but let us dispense with this nonsense once and for all."

"What nonsense?" she said, eyeing him dubiously as he made his voice stern.

"The idiotic notion you have about being too heavy, too big, too fat, or whatever preposterous ideas you have about yourself."

Her dark brows drew together, and she shook her head. "I know you're being kind, Ludo."

"Damnation!" he said, throwing his hands up. "I'm not being kind, you little widgeon. I mean… just look at you…." He did just that, his breath catching as his gaze travelled over her body, laid out for him on his bed, *their* bed. "You're splendid, gorgeous, a bloody goddess, and I'm going to prove it to you."

Bunty stared up at him, astonished by the obvious desire in his eyes. He really meant it. He did not think her too tall, too plump, too… *everything.* Though she had never done so before, Bunty questioned why she thought she was. Well, because she'd been told so. Her mother was always imploring her to lose weight and father always looked disapproving if she ate a dessert. She'd been teased as a girl by those who were supposed to be her friends and she'd heard too many disparaging comments from men not to take them to heart, and yet….

And yet Ludo, this big, glorious man, was looking at her as if she were the last cake in the world, and he was starving.

It was rather… invigorating.

He'd said she was splendid, gorgeous, *a bloody goddess!*

For the first time in her life, Bunty rather thought she felt like one too.

He'd also said he would prove it to her. She wondered just how he intended to do that, but then she realised he was taking off his clothes, and thought of any kind was suspended.

He made rather a performance of it for her, sliding off his cravat and tossing it to her with a wink, before easing out of his coat. Slowly, he unbuttoned his waistcoat, his eyes never leaving hers, that heated and intense gaze making her insides quiver with anticipation. Once he cast it aside, he tugged the shirt from his breeches before pulling it over his head in one smooth movement.

Bunty's mouth went dry.

If she was splendid, he was… *magnificent.*

Big and broad, his shoulders and arms were impressive enough, and now she saw how he'd lifted her as though she'd been made of spun sugar. His chest, though…. Words failed her, though her fingers itched to touch him, to run her fingers through the fleece of coarse hair on his chest and touch the thick quilting of muscle beneath. The desire to rub herself against him like a cat was almost overwhelming, but then she realised he'd discarded his boots and stockings during her reverie, and his fingers had moved to unbutton the fall of his breeches. Bunty was riveted to the spot, filled with curiosity. She had seen the naked male form before, in sculpture at any rate. Not every figure had a strategically placed fig leaf, though she had always been a little underwhelmed by what she'd seen and wondered how that appendage had done the job required of it. All such questions were firmly—and appropriately—put to bed as Ludo pushed his breeches and small clothes to the floor, and kicked them to one side.

"Goodness," she squeaked.

Ludo smirked at her, and she covered her mouth with her hand as a giggle escaped.

He tilted his head to one side, narrowing his eyes.

"Are you laughing at me?" he demanded with mock outrage.

"N-No."

"You're a terrible liar."

"Oh, I'm s-sorry," she managed, struggling not to laugh. "Only you looked so d-dreadfully pleased with yourself."

"And why not?" he demanded, his dark eyebrows flying up. "You were looking at me in a way that made me feel about ten feet tall."

Bunty sighed as he moved closer. "You are rather splendid, Ludo. So handsome. Are you really mine?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "And there's no changing your mind now,

it's too late. You're stuck with me."

Ludo climbed onto the bed and lay down beside her, his head braced on his arm, his eyes warm and mischievous. He looked happy, and Bunty could not help but smile in return.

"Good afternoon, Lady Courtenay."

"Good afternoon, my lord," she replied politely, for all the world as if they had just greeted each other in the park.

"May I debauch you now, my lady?"

Bunty choked out a laugh, only to see him grinning at her with such a boyish gleam of amusement that she threw back her head and laughed again.

"You're dreadful!" she exclaimed, and then caught her breath as he climbed over her. He stared down at her, his blue eyes bright and glinting with desire.

"Yes, and you like it, so you must be every bit as wicked. Let's find out, shall we?"

Bunty was only too happy to do so, sighing as he started where he'd left off. He kissed her everywhere, touching her reverently, caressing and painting intricate patterns with his tongue. The most shocking sounds were drawn from her until she was panting and clutching at the bedclothes, her skin damp as he returned to the sinful place between her legs and made her believe she might go mad as her body spun out of control. It was as though she had been an instrument, put away and forgotten, dusty and unused, and suddenly he had come to teach her how to play, for he seemed to know her body far more intimately than she had known it herself.

She wasn't even shocked when he slid a finger inside her; she only moaned her pleasure and revelled in the way he praised her for her lascivious behaviour. The louder she was, the better he seemed to like it.

"Say my name," he begged her, his voice husky as he slid another finger inside her and caressed until she saw stars. "I want you to come with my name on your lips."

She did not entirely understand what he was asking her for, but then he applied his mouth once more. Pleasure rolled over her, making her hold her breath as the onslaught became overwhelming. She clutched at his hair, at the bed, at anything that might keep her tethered to the earth for surely she would fly away.

"Ludo!" she cried, her body arching, his name torn from her as waves of incandescent joy surged through her, over and over until she

was sated, boneless, and utterly spent.

She was only dimly aware of him kissing his way back up her body, and she blinked hazily at him as he settled between her legs. It was only as he slid that wicked, masculine part of him against her oversensitive flesh that she gasped, and her eyes flew open.

"Now?" she said, a little stunned.

"Definitely now," he agreed, sounding strained and determined. "Unless…?"

He hesitated, and Bunty laughed at the disappointment in his eyes.

"Now," she agreed, wrapping her arms about his neck.

"Thank God," he murmured, sliding his arousal against her in a slick glide that made her close her eyes, her head thrown back.

Bunty moved her hands over his shoulders, glorying in the shift and play of powerful muscle and the damp silk of his skin. The coarse hair on his torso felt delicious against her breasts as he pressed closer, reaching between them to guide himself inside her.

"Speak to me."

Bunty blinked up at him in bewilderment. He wanted conversation? *Now?*

"Tell me it's all right. I don't want to hurt you."

Oh.

"Bunty?"

"It's all right. Don't stop, it's…." She sucked in a breath as she reconsidered that statement and he stilled utterly. For a moment, she breathed carefully around the strange sensation, and then she relaxed by degrees.

"Better?" he asked, his voice strained.

She could feel the tension singing through him.

"Yes."

He moved again, cautiously, slowly, and Bunty stared up at him. He had his eyes closed, his face a picture of concentration. How beautiful he was, and how careful of her. He was tender and thoughtful and… and how had this man gained such a reputation? How had he become what he was purported to be? She could see nothing of that in him now. His eyes flicked open, dazzling blue and filled with triumph as he gazed down at her. Bunty smiled.

"Better?" he asked again, his lips quirking.

"Better," she agreed, and then gasped as he tilted her hips and…

oh.

"Much better," he said this time, and it wasn't a question. He sounded rather smug.

"Oh, yes… m-much…."

Bunty wrapped herself about him and simply held on, clinging to his powerful frame as he taught her what pleasure was, what they could have together. And, oh, it was marvellous. His touch was careful, his attention on her absolute. At this moment, she hadn't the slightest doubt she was the centre of his universe, and she wanted to be there always. The intimacy was astonishing, the closeness with this man she barely knew. Already, she felt he had sunk into her bones, into her soul. She *did* know him, didn't she? At least she recognised his generosity, his kindness, and his willingness to share himself—both his faults and his strengths—and to bolster her own insecurities with his surety. Bunty was lost, drowning in him, in this man she had known so little but was falling for like a star plummeting to earth. His body made hers sing, made her feel right in her own skin in a way she'd never thought possible. No longer was she awkward and hiding herself, trying to disguise her curves, to diminish her height. He loved her body, that much was obvious from the way he was moving, every grunt of pleasure that made her skin prickle with awareness. She had never realised, never expected…. Her mother's staccato, anxiety-laden words of advice for her wedding night had not given the slightest hint that this… *this* was even possible. Perhaps it wouldn't be with anyone else but him, but it *was* him. He was breathing hard now, his movements erratic and harsh, wonderfully masculine sounds of effort and passion filling her ears as he shuddered, jerked, and spilled himself inside her with a hoarse cry that made her heart soar, and hope fill her to the brim.

He collapsed on top of her with a groan, his chest heaving, his body slick with the effort of his exertions. Bunty lay pinned beneath him, feeling a little dazed and very feminine and… and almost delicate as his heavy body pressed her into the mattress. It was heavenly.

"Christ, I'm crushing you," he muttered, hauling himself up.

"No!" Bunty cried, holding onto him and pulling him back. "No. Don't… Don't go. Not yet. I… I like it. I like the weight of you, the feel of you."

He shifted a little, propping his head on his elbow and staring down at her.

"You do, eh?"

There was teasing in his expression, but it was warm and gentle, in no way mocking, and so she just nodded.

“You’ve really gone and done it now, my lady,” he said, his voice softer now. “You’re mine.”

“Yes.”

“No regrets?”

Something flickered in his eyes, something vulnerable and uncertain, and Bunty wanted to chase it away. She reached her hand up to stroke his face, still unable to believe this gorgeous man was really hers.

“Not one,” she said.

Chapter 5

"Wherein the real world intrudes."



13th December 1820. London.

"There's no choice, Ludo. If you will be so ridiculously stubborn about using my money, then we must not waste yours. Your landlady charges a fortune for those meals she cooks. We must either go out to eat, or get some shopping so I may attempt to cook for us, though I warn you now I am more than a little doubtful as to my skills."

"I won't have you skivvying and cooking!"

Bunty rolled her eyes as their discussion went around in a complete circle for the second time. "Then employ a maid and let us get some dinner."

Ludo was sitting up in bed, looking mutinous. His arms were folded across his chest and Bunty tried not to get distracted by the way it made his muscles bulge. She wanted to lick him. He was so delicious, and….

No.

Then he'd have his way, and they could not carry on like this. No matter how delightful it was.

They had not left his rooms in the five days since they'd married. Astonishingly, no one had called. Astonishing that was, until she realised her father had not posted notice of their marriage. He was ashamed of it. Of them. The knowledge burned, especially when she was so happy, but… well, that was her parents' problem. They only knew Ludo by reputation. They would come around when they realised the man he really was. The one she was coming to know.

"But I don't want to go out," he grumbled. "Come back to bed."

He gave the mattress an inviting pat.

Bunty wavered before firming her resolve. "*No.* And it's only for a while. Honestly, anyone would think you were ashamed of…."

She let those word hang in the air as she actually thought about them, and all her old insecurities came crashing down on her.

"Oh, no!" he said, and she looked up, startled by his impatient tone.

He leapt out of bed and crossed the room. She had been standing

by the window in her dressing gown, staring at the street below. Now she was riveted to the sight of her husband striding towards her in all his naked glory. Her breath caught and held as he closed the distance between them and took her face in his hands, staring down at her.

"What maggoty idea has taken hold in that brain of yours, wife? For, if you think I could ever be ashamed of you… My God, that's a laugh. I've never been prouder of anything in my entire life, and that's a fact."

Bunty's gasped, a knot of emotion in her throat.

"Really, Ludo?" she asked, believing him but wanting to hear it again.

She had never known what it was to be so thoroughly approved of, to be with someone—*anyone,* let alone a man—who looked at her as though she was important, as if *her* opinion mattered. Yet it was better even than that, for Ludo looked at her as if she was the beginning and the end of his world. She had tentatively begun to believe he meant it.

"Of course, really," he said, impatient now, and then his expression darkened, and his voice was filled with regret, "it's you who will be ashamed, love."

Bunty took a moment to look him over, feeling a now familiar surge of heat as desire pooled in her belly. She shook her head and smiled at him.

"Now who's having maggoty ideas?"

He gave a huff of laughter, but it was bitter-edged, and she did not like the sound of it. He turned away from her.

"If we go outside that door, you will realise this is all I'm good for."

Bunty watched as he waved a dismissive hand at the bed.

"Don't be foolish, Ludo," she said, thinking perhaps he was joking, but the way he was dragging on his small clothes and then his breeches with sharp, angry movements made her reconsider.

"Fine," he muttered "You want to go out? We'll go out. You'll figure it out eventually, anyway."

"Ludo," she protested, wondering where this unhappy, angry man had come from when he'd been so content just moments earlier.

She ought not have pressed him, ought not have insisted but… but no, this was silly. They were only going out to eat. It wasn't Almack's, not that they'd have a hope of gaining entry there, she thought with amusement and a complete absence of regret. Goodness, she could just

imagine the patronesses' elegant noses turn up in horror if she turned up with….

Oh.

"Ludo."

He did not answer, searching for a clean shirt before giving up and snatching the one he'd married her in off the floor. He'd not worn one since.

"Ludo," she said again, as he tugged the shirt over his head.

She moved to him, standing right before him and clutching at the billowing fabric so he had to give her his attention. He stilled, his eyes wary, tension rolling off him in waves.

"What?" he asked, terse and irritated, but not, she thought, with her.

"Ludo, you know how you don't understand how I have always felt so… so uncomfortable with… with the way I look?"

Ludo rolled his eyes and muttered something under his breath, and Bunty smiled.

"Precisely," she said, sliding her hands about his waist. "You do not understand it because, by some happy miracle, you do not see me like everyone else does."

"Nonsense," he snapped. "It's only that you've let your mother dress you and hidden yourself away in corners, trying to make yourself shorter and skinnier, and something you're not. You're beautiful, inside and out, and everyone else would see it too, if you'd only believe it yourself."

Bunty blinked away the emotion those words produced and reminded herself that she was reassuring him this time. It was only fair, after all, not to mention God's honest truth.

"Well, perhaps," she allowed, her voice quavering. "But the point is, Ludo, you're wrong about what I think, about how I shall feel outside of these doors. I know your reputation. I followed your exploits, you know. I always searched the scandal sheets for your name to see what you'd been up to. I expect I know more about you than you do yourself, though I suspect much of it was fabrication, or at least the truth with fancy embroidery. I know all those things, and now I am coming to know *you*, and I'm proud of you. I'm proud of you, and not only because you're so handsome you make my heart feel all strange and fluttery, but because you're wonderful. You're kind and funny and generous…. Oh, Ludo, don't let other people's opinions spoil everything, for I shan't."

She watched his throat work, saw the doubtful glint in his eyes and pressed on, determined to get her point across.

"You made me believe in myself, Ludo. You've made me feel beautiful these past days, and I shall continue to believe it no matter what others say, so long as you always think it. So believe in my words too… *please?*"

He pulled her into his arms and held her close, resting his head atop hers. He said nothing for the longest time and then looked down at her, one dark eyebrow quirking. "Strange and fluttery?"

Bunty laughed. "Oh, Ludo, that's the bit of my heartfelt declaration that stuck in your head, was it?"

He gave her an odd look. "I'm a man, of course it was."

She huffed and shook her head, giving in. "Yes, my beautiful man. Looking at you, thinking of you… it does peculiar things to my heart."

"Not just your heart," he said, waggling his eyebrows at her.

Bunty spluttered and buried her face in his shirt.

"Dreadful," she said despairingly.

Ludo touched her chin with his fingers, raising her face to his and bending down, kissing her with such tenderness that tears pricked at her eyes.

"You make me believe I could be something," he said quietly. "And I want to be, for you. I want that very badly."

Bunty swallowed and gave a decisive nod. "You already are, Ludo, but I believe you can be anything you want. I believe in you."

Ludo took Bunty to Abingdon's chop shop and watched his wife with the greatest of pleasure as she took in her surroundings. That she had never been to such a place in her life was evident, as her fascinated gaze swept over everything and everyone. At first he'd hesitated, uncertain he should take her inside, but… well, they had to eat, and she was right. If he was dead set against spending her money —which he knew was idiotic, but had stuck in his brain as a matter of principle—then it was either this or making her cook for them, and that he would not do. She had been raised a lady, raised with the expectation and ability to run a large and prosperous household. A woman who might have married an earl, or at least a viscount, not some disowned, disgraced youngest son with nothing but his tarnished name to claim as his own.

As he'd opened the door, he'd wished he was taking her somewhere fancy, that he could afford Claridge's or Grillon's, but

now, watching her, he rather thought she preferred this. It was a bustling place with the rich scent of roasted meat heavy on the air. Ludo's stomach growled as he realised how hungry he was. A harried waiter came up and took their orders, slapped a jug of ale on the table, and gave the scarred top a perfunctory wipe with a grubby cloth before hurrying away again.

Ludo poured them each a glass and watched with amusement as Bunty took a cautious sniff and then sipped. She screwed up her face and shuddered, then resolutely took another sip. By the fifth sip she seemed to have the hang of it, and Ludo reached his hand across the table, an odd sensation in his chest as he stared at her. She had always been a far-off dream, a bright hope he'd never dared want, for it was too implausible, too fantastic that she would ever look at someone like him, but here she was. His wife. Emotion filled his heart, pushed at his ribs, something new and fragile and optimistic, and he dared to let it flare to life instead of snuffing it out as he had with every other thing he'd ever wanted for himself. His hand was on the table, palm up. He felt silly, vulnerable, and went to withdraw it, except she noticed then that he had reached for her, and put her hand in his. She curled her fingers between his and held on tight, squeezing a little and smiling at him.

"I like it here," she said, happiness shining in her eyes. "And it smells delicious."

"Not as delicious as you, I'll wager," he said, just loud enough in the burble of noise surrounding them that she heard and blushed a lovely shade of pink.

The look in her eyes said *wicked man,* but the smile on her lips said that she liked him just fine. Ludo sighed and realised that he was happy. How strange life was, that one could be so low, so close to despairing, and then be lifted to such dizzying heights by another.

Their meal came—pork chops and boiled potatoes and good, thick gravy—and Ludo tucked in with gusto, polishing off his serving and ordering another before Bunty was half way through hers.

"Eat up," he chided her. "You need to keep your strength up, my lady."

Puzzled for a moment, she looked up at him.

"Why…?" she began, and then pursed her lips as he chuckled at her.

Once their meal was over, Ludo paid and escorted her outside once more.

"Oh, Ludo, it's snowing," she said in delight, holding out her

gloved hand and watching as the tiny flakes settled for a moment before disappearing.

"So it is. I had better take you home and warm you up, then."

She laughed, looking up at him with such an expression of happiness that the earth seemed to pitch beneath his feet and settle anew, as though rearranged and nothing would ever be the same again. The frail, blossoming flame of hope unfurled a little farther inside him, warming him. He stopped in his tracks and she opened her mouth, no doubt to ask why, but Ludo bent his head and kissed her, there in the street, in full view of everyone.

She gave a soft gasp, and for a moment he thought she was cross, but then her mouth tilted up at the edges, a smile for him alone.

"Bunty," he said, his voice suddenly hoarse, trembling with uncertainty but wanting to tell her, to give her the truth of everything he felt. "Bunty, I—"

"Well, well, if it ain't Ludo, and feeling up his light-o'-love in the middle of the street, no less."

Ludo stiffened, his heart jolting in his chest, the familiar sense of panic washing over him at that voice, that vile, awful voice.

"That's my wife you speak of, Bramwell," he said, turning towards the face of his nightmares.

Stupid. He was a grown man, big enough to pick Bramwell up and shake him in one hand, yet somehow he was never a grown man with his big brother. Instead, Ludo found himself reduced to a snivelling child, pissing his pants with terror of what the beast would do next.

"Ah, yes. Heard you got yourself caught in a snare, big, dumb ox that you are. Thinking with your prick as ever, eh?" Bramwell turned those cold, green eyes to Bunty. "And you, you foolish chit, did you think he had his hands on the family money, my sweet? He ain't and won't ever have."

Ludo felt the way she stiffened with indignation, and drew her in, close to his side. He would not let Bramwell hurt her. Surely he could manage that at least. Couldn't he? He felt frozen, his guts churning.

"You heard wrong, my lord. It was a tryst, and one I was eager for, I assure you. Incidentally, I wouldn't touch your money with a ten-foot pole, and neither would Ludo," Bunty said, with all the poise of a queen speaking to a lowly pleb.

Ludo stared at her in awe.

"Ah, a feisty one, and toothsome too," Bramwell said, leering at Bunty in a way that made Ludo long to knock his teeth down his

throat.

The hand that wasn't holding Bunty plastered to his side closed into a fist, but he couldn't breathe. Something cold and panicky held him immobile. Years of being locked in cupboards and small spaces, of pranks that had seen him tumbling down stairs or tripped on his face, of myriad little everyday cruelties and bigger ones too made him freeze with terror. Dangling him by his ankles from an upper storey window had been one of Bramwell's favourites until Ludo had become too big to hold. Bramwell hadn't realised his limitations before he'd almost dropped Ludo on his head, mind you.

"No, not in the least feisty, just honest," Bunty said with a thin smile. "You see, I recognise a bully when I see one."

"Ha!" Bramwell seemed genuinely amused by that. "One need not be a bully when a fellow's such a weakling. Don't let all that brawn fool you, my flower. He's a pathetic worm. No, you come see me if it's a man you're wanting, I'll see you right…."

Bramwell raised his hand, as if he would touch Bunty. He reached for her, cruelty in every bone, down to his marrow, and something inside Ludo fractured. Bunty was everything good in his life, a golden gossamer thread, a bright glimmer of hope, of truth and kindness and trust, and he loved… *loved* her. Yet Bramwell reached out as if he had the right to lay his filthy hand on her lovely skin. Ludo reacted. He didn't know what he'd done at first, what exactly had happened, but the next moment Bramwell lay sprawled on the floor, ungainly and ridiculous, his hat having tumbled away into the gutter. Bramwell was gasping, fishlike, his glassy eyes dazed, and he was bleeding like a stuck pig. There had been the crunch of bone, Ludo thought. Bramwell's nose, perhaps? He looked at his fist, a little stunned. He'd done it. After so many years of wishing he had the courage, he'd done it. He had fought so many bigger men—far more dangerous men—and yet Bramwell had always effortlessly reduced him to that terrified child.

No longer.

Ludo turned to look at Bunty, who was beaming at him. She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"Well done!"

He fought the urge to preen, aware he'd not acted as a gentleman, but too relieved to have acted at all to give a damn. He looked back to see Mr Middleton, the family's man of business, helping Bramwell up. He'd not even noticed him before now. That was Middleton all over, though: never noticed, always in the background, quietly smoothing over the difficulties Ludo's loud-mouthed brothers and his devil of a

father created. No. Not *his* father. Ludo was none of his, thank God.

Bramwell looked shaken, and older than Ludo remembered. Well, he *was* older, fifteen years older. He'd been the nightmare that had terrorised Ludo once his mother had died. Bramwell and his brother George had been partners in crime, devising ways to torture Ludo with their father's blessing until he was afraid of his own shadow.

"Stay away from my wife," Ludo managed, clutching Bunty's hand.

He drew strength from her, strength enough to look into the eyes that had always made him afraid, but without flinching. Never again would he flinch. He'd fight dragons for Bunty. He could deal with this… this obnoxious, overweight fool. Ludo allowed himself to really look at Bramwell, and saw the paunch, the double chin and bloodshot eyes. He was getting old, old and weak, years of dissipation and cruelty shown plainly on a face that did not understand kindness, tenderness, or compassion. Ludo pitied him.

"I don't want to see you again, Bramwell, and you may tell George to expect the same treatment. Stay away from us. I want none of you, and we certainly have no interest in your money."

He looked at Bunty, saw her eyes shining with admiration, and with belief in him.

"We don't need it," he added.

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

Bramwell sent him a look of pure loathing, one hand clutching a handkerchief to his nose, which was bleeding profusely. Middleton, efficient as ever, had hailed a hackney and helped Bramwell inside. He hesitated before moving back to Ludo.

"Come and see me, my lord. As soon as you may. It's important."

Ludo opened his mouth to say he wouldn't go anywhere near anyone associated with his family, but Middleton put a hand out, holding Ludo's arm for a moment. From neat, balding, precise Middleton, this was so extraordinary that Ludo could only stare.

"Please," he said urgently, and then hurried back to the hackney and got in.



Ludo was silent as they walked back home, and Bunty did not press him, aware that he needed a little quiet to gather himself. She held tight to his arm, though, so he knew she was with him, supporting him. Once again, she remembered the look on his face when he'd seen his oldest brother. He'd gone the most startling shade

of white, his big frame rigid with tension. She'd known then, or at least she suspected she knew what kind of man Bramwell Courtenay, the Earl of Edgmond, was. He was the kind to inflict harm on those weaker than him and take pleasure in it. She could see it at once in those callous eyes, as lacking in feeling as a dead fish. It was in the cruelty of his thin lips, just as much as in his vile words and insinuations. It was in the way she had felt Ludo react, an instinct born of years of abuse at the hands of an older brother.

She imagined Ludo as a boy, all glorious tumbling black curls and big blue eyes, and then two brothers in Bramwell's mould, and….

And the Marquess of Farringdon. Everyone knew of him. Everyone knew of the marquess and his cruelty, his vicious temper and his pride. How must a man like that have felt to have discovered himself a cuckold?

Oh, Ludo.

Her heart broke and she held tighter to his arm. It had been such a shock to see his fear. Ludo was so large, so vital and strong, so powerful. She'd read of his brawling, read of his skill in the boxing ring. One of Jackson's favourites, he was a natural. All that beautiful strength that he had given her so wholeheartedly and with such tenderness, had been driven away with a few words from a man who must have tormented his childhood. She wanted to go back to Bramwell now, this instant, and… and….

Bunty sucked in a breath, startled by the violence of her own thoughts, the anger and the need for retribution. She had never in her life wanted to hurt someone, but… but Bramwell had hurt Ludo. Bramwell had been his big brother, a role that ought to at least be one of camaraderie, if not of protection. And instead….

"Bunty?"

Bunty blinked, looking up at Ludo's appalled face, only then realising her eyes were wet with tears.

"Oh, God, Bunty, I'm so sorry. I should not have let him speak to you so. I… I should have—"

She reached up and pressed a finger to his lips. "You did. You were admirable. I'm so proud of you. Now do open the door and let us go inside. The snow is falling heavier, I think."

Bunty watched as he fumbled for the key, letting them in. He seemed a little lost, uncertain, and she took off his overcoat, guided him to a chair and made him sit down as she stoked the fire back to life and put a kettle on for tea. She hung up wet things and pulled off his boots as the kettle sang. Calmed by routine, she poured tea,

putting a cup into his hand, dosed heavily with sugar.

He sipped and she watched him come back to himself. To her. Taking his empty cup, she put it down and sat in his lap. He sighed and wrapped his arms around her, laying his head against her shoulder as she stroked his hair, curling now, damp from the snow despite his hat.

"Tell me," she said.

He did, haltingly at first, and then a tumble of words like water rushing over a cliff's edge, eager for the fall, eager to rid himself of the memories and let them flow away.

Bunty heard it, all of it, stoic, not weeping, though she wanted to. She wanted to sob and rage and howl with fury, but she held it back, certain he would not want that. She held him, though, kissed him when she could no longer bear not to, smothered her anger and turned it into a caress. It was at once just as she had imagined, and far worse. When he was done, she did not move, aware that he was calm now, not wanting to disturb his tranquillity by doing or saying the wrong thing.

"It wasn't all bad," he said, squeezing her fingers.

She blinked hard as his face blurred, touched that he would want to reassure her, when he was the one who had lived it.

"Whilst my mother lived, I was protected and cosseted and loved. I do remember that. She told me about my real father."

"The Italian count?"

He nodded.

"She would not run off with him because she did not want you to endure the scandal, yet she named you Ludovic? Like your father, Ludovico?" She tried to keep the censure from her voice, but failed.

He shrugged, his big shoulders rolling. "At first, she thought she'd got away with it, I think. I think she believed it would be her private joke. Yet it wasn't long before it became clear I was not like my brothers, and the rumours flew. She believed she'd been discreet, yet someone knew. Someone always knows. She took me away then, ran away, more like."

"Where did you go?"

Ludo smiled. "She had a house in Kent. Hers, not Father's. He could not take it from her. Some legal quirk. He tried to get around it, but her mother had been a canny soul, I think. Anyway, she took us there, and we were happy."

"Until she died."

Pain flickered in his eyes, and Bunty wanted to never see such an expression again. She vowed she would do anything she could to prevent it.

"Yes. I was eight. Then… Then it was not good at all. Not for a long time. Not…" He reached up and cupped her face, and she wondered at the gentleness of this man, who'd had so little of it in his life. "Not until you."

Bunty turned into his touch and kissed his palm, holding his hand there with her own.

"It is the strangest thing," he said, a wondering tone to his voice. "To think he has frightened me so these many years when… when he's nothing. He's less than nothing. A vain, vile nothing of a man. He has money and power, and yet he's…."

"Pathetic," Bunty said firmly, disgust in every syllable. "Preying on those weaker than himself. He's no man, Ludo. Not like you. He does not deserve a moment more of your attention, and I should like it very much if you never thought of him ever again, but… but if you do, if you want to tell me more… anything. I shall always listen."

Ludo tipped his head back and stared at her.

"I don't understand it," he said, almost to himself. "I don't understand what I did. How did I manage it? How did I convince you to marry me?"

Bunty did not consider that a question worthy of an answer, as it was far too obvious, so she kissed him instead, and he seemed to like that well enough.

Chapter 6

"Wherein the final piece of the puzzle reveals a lovely picture."



14th December 1820. London.

Ludo awoke early. It was barely dawn, just a faint smudge of daylight creeping around the curtains. Bunty sighed and snuggled closer to him, and Ludo smiled. Lucky bastard. She was warm and soft and… and rather astonishing. He'd tried to untangle everything it was he felt for her, but it had all been so sudden, and yet a creeping thing that he'd been vaguely aware of for years. He'd always held his breath when he'd caught sight of her in a crowd, on a street, or at the theatre. It had been like glimpsing a dream, something lovely and so impossible you could not hope to hold on to it, aware that it was never to be real, never to be yours. He tightened his grip on her lush curves—which were reassuringly tangible and mouth–watering—as she sighed and stretched. His feelings rose in a mess of untidy bafflement. He did not understand why she had protected him so fiercely when he'd been so obviously, pathetically weak. He did not know why she should smile at him with happiness sparkling in her eyes when he'd done so little to deserve it. God, he'd taken her from an opulent home and installed her in this dingy place, and yet she looked at him like… like she was *glad*.

The tangle in his chest was woven so tight he suspected he would never unravel it, but in the end it resolved itself into one bright, shining truth, so obvious it was undeniable. Not that he wanted to deny it. He wanted to shout it from the rooftops, but he did not think she would like that. Besides, he needed to tell her first.

She stirred again, with a flutter of dark eyelashes, and her lovely eyes were warm and soft, hazy with sleep, and then with a hotter emotion as her gaze settled on him. Oh, he liked that look.

"Good morning," she murmured, giving a contented sigh of pleasure.

Ludo shifted down the bed until they were eye to eye.

"Good morning, beautiful."

She made a little harrumphing sound and put a hand up to her hair, wincing. "You are an odd creature, to enjoy such a sight."

"No. I am your husband, and right about all things. I do not care

that your hair looks like a bird has nested in it. You *are* beautiful: quite astoundingly lovely."

There was a helpless laugh that made his heart kick about behind his ribs, and then she looked up at him.

"You *are* an odd creature, but I like you very much. I like your compliments, and I love waking up with you."

"I love you, Bunty."

Her mouth fell open, and Ludo sat up as she lay there, gazing at him.

"I do. I love you."

She blinked hard, her eyes glittering, and Ludo panicked as a tear escaped.

Oh. Oh, no. Ought he not have said that? Was it too soon? Should he have waited?

"Oh, Bunty… I…."

He did not know what to say. He could not… *would* not take it back. The truth of it had settled inside him, weighty and honest, and he did not want to deny it.

Only… only if she did not want it….

Her soft hands reached for him, pulling his head down. She kissed him, murmuring against his lips.

"Love you. I love you, Ludo. You've made me so happy."

Oh, thank Christ for that.

He kissed her back, enthusiastic now, eager to make her happier still. As a husband he might not have been up to much—not yet, anyway, though he had plans, lots of plans—but this… this he could do. This he could do very well, thank you very much.

So he did. Several times.



It took a great deal of persuading to get Ludo out of bed, more to get him out of the house, particularly when he realised where she wanted to go.

"He said it was important, Ludo."

Ludo huffed, grumbling as he pulled on his greatcoat.

Bunty hoped her instincts were correct, and that this visit to the family's man of business would not cause him further upset. She had seen the distaste in Mr Middleton's eyes when his employer had come upon them yesterday. In fact, she believed loathing was closer to what

she had seen there. It had been hidden beneath a façade of professionalism and icy civility once he'd bent to help the earl to his feet, from where Ludo had sent him sprawling, but it had unmistakeably been there.

To her relief, they would not need to visit any of the family homes, for Mr Middleton also kept an office in the city.

"Well, if we must, I ought to call in and see to some business of my own on the way," said Ludo, his tone suggesting he was still unenthusiastic about the idea, but accepting at least.

"Of course," she said brightly, tying her bonnet.

She looked up as he moved before her and tweaked the bow, before leaning down and kissing her.

"Gorgeous," he said, leaving her giddy and happily dazed with nothing more than a word and a peck on the lips.

Bunty kicked her heels in the hallway of the large red brick building, a little irritated to have been abandoned, but not wanting to pry. Men were funny about matters involving money, and Ludo was obviously very much on his dignity about the state of his finances. Still, her curiosity burned, and she dared to wander down the hallway a bit and peek into the room at the end. A huge printing press was set up here, and the smell of ink hung heavy on the air.

"I knew you'd not be able to resist."

Bunty spun around to see Ludo watching her.

"Oh. Well, no. I'm sorry. Only I had nothing to do and I was curious. Is this part of your business? Printing?"

"In a way," he said. He seemed rather tense, anxious and yet also pleased.

"Did your meeting go well?"

He nodded, turning this hat around and around in his hand.

"It did, better than I expected. We've…." He laughed, a glint of astonishment in his eyes. "We've made some money. Not… Not a huge amount, but more than we'd expected."

"Well, that's marvellous," she said, meaning it. "But how, Ludo? Won't you tell me?"

He hesitated. She moved towards him and took his hand, aware that he was nervous, but uncertain why.

"Promise you won't laugh."

Bunty stared up at him. “Why on earth would I laugh at something that makes money?”

He ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up in a riot of thick dark curls. Bunty reached up on her toes and enjoyed the miraculous delight of smoothing it back into place.

“Well,” he said, staring down at her. “Oh, come along. I’ll show you.”

He tugged at her hand and Bunty hurried beside him as he strode down the corridor and up a flight of stairs. He opened a door, guiding her into a cramped, dingy office. Weak daylight filtered in through the grubby windows, and the place needed a good sweep, but Bunty strove to ignore that, too curious about what he wanted to show her.

He closed the door and tapped his hat on his thigh a couple of times before clearing his throat. “Have you ever seen those dissection puzzles? I had one as a boy. Well, what was left of one. Half the pieces were missing by the time it came to me, but it was a map of the world pasted onto board and cut up into sections. It was supposed to teach geography, and it did, rather cleverly. I always thought it would be more fun if there were other things to put back together, though. Pictures, for example.”

“What sort of pictures?” she asked, more than surprised at his words.

He shrugged, a little diffident, and then gestured to a table where there were a dozen or more boxes stacked. Bunty moved to the table and, as he seemed to be waiting for her to do so, lifted the lid on the box nearest her. There were a jumble of pieces inside and she tipped them onto the table.

“Oh,” she said, enchanted to see what he meant. Putting aside her reticule, she organised the pieces, putting them back together to make a picture of a smug-looking cat, his paw holding down the tail of a mouse. The poor mouse was yanking at his tail like fury, trying to get free. “Oh, Ludo, it’s marvellous. A child would love this.”

Ludo grinned at her.

“That one is for a younger child. There’s a dog, too, and a rabbit. Then here, these are for older children.” He tipped over another box, scattering more pieces, smaller and more complex this time. “There’s a farmyard scene, and a knight fighting a dragon so far.”

Bunty exclaimed with delight and said nothing at all for some time, deep in concentration until she had completed the farmyard scene, complete with a pretty cottage, a milkmaid and chickens and ducks, sheep and cows.

“It’s beautiful. What a clever artist you have to draw such beautiful pictures too.”

She looked up to see his face filled with pleasure. “Well, the pen drawings are printed out so we can reproduce them in numbers, but then they are hand-painted so they’re colourful.”

Bunty stared at the puzzle a little longer, considering, studying the way the light glimmered on the duck pond and the sunlight glittered on the puddles in the cobbled yard, as if it had just rained.

“These are the originals?” she guessed, looking up at him.

Ludo nodded. “The painting on the ones we sell are less detailed, as it takes too long, but still very good quality. We’ve some marvellous painters working with us.”

“Yes,” Bunty agreed, nodding. “You do.”

“You like them, then?” he asked, and she heard the eagerness in his voice.

“I think they’re wonderful. Any child would be delighted to receive such a gift. Goodness, *I* would be delighted. They’re marvellous, Ludo.”

Bunty squealed as he swept her up, spun her around, and then kissed her soundly.

“*You’re* marvellous,” he said, and she could see happiness shining in his eyes.

Her heart lurched, knowing she had done that. She kissed him and then pushed him away with a laugh, returning the puzzles she’d made back to their boxes. As she put the last lid back on the box she frowned, tracing her finger over the words, *John Cooper’s Dissected Puzzles*.

“This was your idea, wasn’t it, Ludo? Your creation?”

Ludo nodded. “Yes.”

“Then why isn’t your name on the box. Who is John Cooper?”

“John is the printer, my business partner. Be reasonable, love. Who in their right mind would buy something for a child created by Lascivious Lord Courtenay?”

He laughed, but she thought there was regret in the sound.

“I suppose so,” she said, not liking the truth of his words. “It’s not fair, though, when it was your idea.”

Rather more than his idea, she suspected.

Ludo moved closer to her and lifted her chin, kissing her. “You know. That’s all I care about. Now come along, my love, and let us get

the tedious part of the day over with. I've no doubt Middleton will put me in a wretched temper, so I shall leave it to you to cheer me up once we're done."

He winked at her to show he didn't blame her for dragging him to see the man, and Bunty followed him out to find a hackney.



Mr Middleton's office was every bit as neat and precise as the man himself. He was small of stature, balding, and with a round face which seemed rounder still as he peered owlishly out from behind thick spectacles. He took them off, cleaning the lenses with care, and surreptitiously glancing at Ludo who was pacing the elegant room like a caged lion, tension rolling off his large frame with every move.

"Ludo, do come and sit down," Bunty said, patting the chair beside her, aware that his prowling was making Mr Middleton nervous.

He folded his arms, scowling, and for a moment Bunty worried he'd balk and tell Middleton to bloody well get on with it. She could see the desire to do so burning in his eyes. She patted the seat again and he sighed, moving to sit beside her with a glower. Bunty reached for his hand and he curled his fingers around hers.

"Thank you for coming, my lord," Middleton said, replacing his spectacles. "I… I admit I was uncertain you would come but, for once, I believe I can do you some good."

"You mean unlike that time when you told me my father had cut me out of his will?"

Middleton blanched and Bunty squeezed his hand.

"Mr Middleton was only doing his job, Ludo. It was not his choice."

Middleton sent her a look of profound gratitude and nodded. "Quite so, my lord. I was sorry to do it, and for any other… er… unpleasantness that has passed through my hands over the years."

Ludo snorted but said nothing.

"Bearing that in mind, I beg you to remember that your father is my employer and that he strictly forbade me to give you any details of… of the inheritance your mother left you."

"Inheritance?" Ludo echoed, sounding stunned. "But there was nothing. Father always took great delight in reminding me I had nothing of hers…."

He broke off and Bunty firmed her grip on his hand.

"That was untrue, I regret to say," Middleton said with a heavy

sigh. “Though it would not have been yours until now, until you took a wife. Those were the terms of the will.”

Mr Middleton reached down beside him and lifted a box, placing it on the table before him. “Firstly, there are these personal effects which your mother wished you to have.”

Bunty watched Ludo, saw his throat working, saw the moment he gathered his courage and reached for the box. He placed it carefully on his lap and lifted the lid.

Inside were two small paintings. One was of his mother as a young woman, a beautiful smiling portrait with vivid blue eyes and soft brown curls.

“You have her eyes,” Bunty said, hearing her voice quaver.

Ludo blinked hard and nodded, handing her the painting to look beneath.

“Oh,” he said.

Here was a painting of a man. A big, rugged, pirate of a man, with thick black curls and dark, laughing eyes, a full sensuous mouth, and an air of disreputable charm.

“Your father,” Middleton said, smiling. “I believe there are details of where he might be contacted, should you wish to do so?”

“He’s still alive?” Ludo said, clearly astonished. “But Bramwell said—” He cursed and shook his head. “Idiot.”

“Aren’t you glad you came?” Bunty asked gently, watching his face.

“I am,” he said, staring at the portrait of his father, of a man who bore a striking resemblance to Ludo. He reached for his mother’s portrait, and Bunty felt her heart constrict as he touched a reverent finger to her lovely face. “Thank you, Middleton. I… I cannot tell you how happy I am to have these. I’m grateful.”

Middleton returned a look full of regret. “I am only happy to have brought you something pleasant for a change, my lord.”

“Not your fault,” Ludo said gruffly, putting the paintings back in the box with care. He stood and held his hand out to the man. “Well, if that’s all, I’ll bid you—”

“Oh! No, my lord, that is not all.”

Ludo frowned at him. “It isn’t?”

Middleton shook his head, his eyes glimmering with amusement. “No, Lord Courtenay. There is the matter of your mother’s house, and a bequest of… let me see, with interest… yes, nine thousand, eight

hundred and twenty-seven pounds.

Ludo sat down again with such a crash Bunty feared for the chair.

"H-House?" he said faintly. "Nine thousand…?"

"Nine thousand, eight hundred and twenty-seven pounds, ten shillings and sixpence, if you wish the precise figure," Middleton repeated helpfully.

"Breathe, Ludo," Bunty said, reaching for his hand again, as he'd gone a rather odd colour.

He clutched at her hand so tightly she almost protested.

"Where is the house?" Bunty said, hoping it was Ludo's childhood home.

"In Kent, Lady Courtenay. I understand it has been in Lord Courtenay's mother's family for generations. It is in good order, having had caretakers look after it in the interim. I took the liberty of asking them to prepare for your arrival, having assumed you would wish to visit the property."

"The caretakers," Ludo asked, his voice hoarse. "Who?"

"A Mr and Mrs Widdershins."

"Widdy," he said, audibly choked now. "Oh, good Lord. I never… I never imagined…." He turned to Bunty, his eyes shining with emotion. "A home, Bunty. We have a home. *My* home!"

"Oh, Ludo, I'm so happy for you." Bunty turned back to Mr Middleton, hardly able to get the words out. "Thank you."

The man looked a little overcome himself, but nodded, obviously pleased.

Ludo stood and held out his hand to Mr Middleton, who was now looking a little stunned, no doubt used to less than polite treatment at the hands of Ludo's family.

"Thank you, Middleton. Thank you so much, and I do understand… why you didn't tell me before."

Middleton shook his hand firmly. "I have wished to these many years, my lord, only…."

"No need to explain," Ludo said kindly. "He's your employer. I understand, truly."

Middleton frowned, looking extremely displeased at this fact.

"He is, and I am not in a position to consider retirement, not with five daughters still unmarried," he added with a sigh. "However, should you ever be in a position to… to…."

He flushed then, such an extraordinary sight against his serious visage that Bunty's eyebrows rose.

"You would like to come and work for Lord Courtenay?" she guessed.

Ludo stared at her in astonishment and then looked back to Middleton. "You're not serious? You'd leave my father's employ for *mine*?"

"In a heartbeat," Middleton said calmly.

Ludo's incredulity made Bunty's chest hurt. He'd truly had no idea that there was anyone who would believe in him. Yet anyone who had been in his company for any length of time must have been able to see the goodness that shone from him, the honour and integrity.

Ludo frowned, considering this. "Middleton, I have a business venture that is showing signs of promise. It needs a firm hand, a good business brain to get it off the ground. I also have… nine thousand, eight hundred, and—"

"Twenty-seven pounds, ten shillings and sixpence," Middleton supplied for him.

"Precisely." Ludo nodded. "Can I afford you?"

Middleton grinned at him. "I believe that you can, my lord."

Chapter 7

"Wherein a house in the country."



14th December 1820. London.

They returned home and began packing at once as Ludo was beside himself with excitement. He gave his landlady notice on his rooms and arranged for a carriage to collect them and their luggage at nine the following morning. Packing didn't take long. Besides a wardrobe that certainly rivalled Bunty's for quantity, and most certainly for style, Ludo had few belongings. Bunty had not yet had the belongings which were a part of her dowry sent over, as Ludo's rooms simply had not the space for them. She was cross, in fact, that her parents had still not visited once since her marriage. The only word she'd had were a few tearful letters from her mother and a rather sternly worded note from her father, which gruffly reminded her she could return home at any time, should she come to realise the gravity of the mistake she'd made. Bunty could not blame them for their fears, but she could blame them for being ashamed and not coming to visit her.

She therefore took great delight in writing and telling them both how blissfully happy she was, how Ludo's business had the makings of a terrific success, and how they were about to move into their new home in the country, where Ludo would keep her in fine style, thank you very much. The letter included a pointed reminder that Papa had not announced their marriage, and a firm suggestion that he do so, at once. She did not invite them for Christmas. She would invite them soon, naturally, but not yet. Perhaps Easter, but only if they swore to be polite to her husband.

Bunty looked around to see if there was anything left to pack, finding only the two lovely paintings on the wall. Smiling, she moved towards them and took the one of the elegant house off the wall. She looked up as Ludo came in from outside, bringing the scent of cold air with him and brushing snow from his hair. He ran to her and swept her up, kissing her hard and making her squeal with the press of his cold lips and icy hands upon her warm skin.

"Warm me up, wife. I'm chilled to the marrow."

"Eek! Get off me, you're freezing," she complained, though half-heartedly.

He stilled, looking at the picture she had clung to valiantly during his boisterous entrance.

"That's it," he said, smiling at her. "That's home."

Bunty nodded, thrilled that she'd been correct.

"It's so beautiful, Ludo. I can't wait to live there, with you and… and you painted it, didn't you? And all the pictures for the puzzles. Why ever didn't you tell me?" she exclaimed crossly as he gave a sheepish nod. "I'm so proud of you. Imagine having an artist for a husband!"

"You don't mind?" he asked, rubbing the back of his neck and looking awkward.

Bunty stared at him, perplexed. "Why would I mind?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. It's not very… manly."

"Don't be ridiculous, whoever…?" She sighed and shook her head. "Never mind. Darling, if ever something as stupid as that thought crosses your mind again, would you just investigate the source of it before you believe it? I feel confident supposing it was something Farringdon, or one of your ghastly brothers told you. Am I correct?"

Ludo frowned, considering this and then his face cleared. "Yes, by God. How—"

Bunty pressed a finger to his lips. "Did it never cross your mind that all the great artists are men? Women don't get a look in."

Ludo huffed. "Well, obviously, but that's hardly what this is. This is dabbling with watercolours, which is exactly what young ladies do, and your Great-Aunt Mary."

"I don't have a Great-Aunt Mary."

He rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean."

"Yes. I do, and you're wrong. Ludo, you're not dabbling. I may be biased, but I do have an eye for a good painting. I met Henry Barbour once and he told me so. What's more, I believe these are more than good. I think they're excellent, and I know you ought to take it seriously."

"You met Henry Barbour?" Ludo's eyes had lit with awe, and he appeared to have completely disregarded everything else she'd said.

"I did, yes. Father is a distant cousin of the Marquess of Winterbourne, who is one of Mr Barbour's closest friends. We were there one summer, and he introduced me."

"He's not the slightest bit mad, is he?"

Bunty shook her head at once.

“Goodness, no. Very shy, rather, and somewhat eccentric, to be sure. He dislikes people on the whole, but he was charming and spoke to me at length about his work, and about some of the others I’d seen at the Royal Academy’s summer exhibition. Indeed, I think I should show him some of yours. Perhaps I shall send one to him,” she mused.

All the colour drained from Ludo’s face. “Oh, no. Not on your life. He’s… he’s a *genius.* You’ll not go sending my paltry offerings to show him.”

Bunty sighed and set his painting aside with care before moving back to him. She wrapped her arms about his waist and stared up at him.

“I’m fat,” she said baldly. “I’m fat and ungainly, and too tall.”

His face darkened with fury.

“And I’m the Queen of Sheba!” he retorted. “What the devil has made you say so? You’re gorgeous, Bunty. Surely you know I can’t keep my bloody hands off you? I’ve been half in love with you for… for *years,* wishing and hoping such a beautiful creature could be mine.”

Bunty swallowed down the emotion that made her throat feel tight on hearing those impassioned words. Instead, she reached up and touched his cheek.

“You’re an artist, Ludo. You’re a clever, talented man, and you will be a great success. I am so proud of you. I believe in you. The only thing left to do is believe in yourself.”

“That was a dirty trick,” he grumbled, but he pulled her close and she smiled up at him.

“It made my point, though. Other people have always given me their opinions, far too freely, and I always believed them. Yet, you make me see they were wrong, terribly, cruelly wrong. Let me do the same for you, love. That wretch, Farringdon, your brothers, they all made you feel worthless, and that’s so far from the truth.”

He let out a breath and nodded.

“Very well,” he said, still a little gruff. “But it will be some time before I have the courage to show anything to Henry Barbour, let me assure you.”

“That’s all right. We have plenty of time.”



The journey to Russell House was cold and tedious, but neither Ludo nor Bunty complained. Buoyed by excitement and distracted by each other, the time passed pleasantly as Ludo invented ways to keep

Bunty warm. He was very good at it.

They worried as the snow fell with increasing enthusiasm: large, soft flakes tumbling from the white sky overhead and laying still and pristine over the beautiful landscape.

“How lovely it is,” Bunty said, staring out of the window.

“It is. It makes me wish I had my paints to hand but, all the same, I wish it would leave off until we’re sat in front of a warm fire.”

“We’ll get there.” Bunty ducked back under his arm and luxuriated in his warmth. Her husband was better than any hot brick for keeping warm on a long journey.

Despite being slowed by the snow, they arrived at midday. Ludo jumped out of the carriage, reaching back to help Bunty, and then gazed up at the house in wonder.

“My word, but it’s lovely. I feel like I’m dreaming. Is it really ours?”

“It is,” Bunty said, enjoying the pleasure in his eyes and his obvious happiness.

“It’s smaller than I remember,” he said with a laugh. “In my memories it’s a vast, cavernous place, but it is every bit as beautiful.”

Bunty laughed. “Well, I don’t think it’s shrunk, love, more that you’ve grown. It is beautiful, though.”

It was. A seven hundred-year-old medieval hall house overlooking the rolling Kentish countryside, the place was graceful and ancient. Elegant arched windows and an arched front door gave it a romantic feel, especially now, with its long roof dusted with snow and the chimneys coiling smoke into the sky and promising a warm welcome.

The front door opened as they walked towards it, and an older couple appeared. The lady was short and squat with iron grey hair, and a fierce expression that softened when she laid eyes on Ludo. She reached for her apron and pressed it to her mouth to muffle a little cry of delight.

“Widdy?” Ludo said, incredulous even though he’d known the old housekeeper would still be here. “Is that really you?”

“*Oh*,” the woman said, trying valiantly to curtsey and not to cry, nor to run and hug Ludo as she clearly wished to do. “Oh, welcome home, my lord.”

To Bunty’s delight, Ludo had no such restraint and gave her a hug, swift and enthusiastic.

“You’ve not changed a bit,” he said, delighted and earning himself a snort of disbelief. “Nor you, Mr Widdershins. I feel like a boy again.”

“Ah, and we have missed you, my lord. You and your Mama both, God rest her soul. My poor Agnes was heartbroken when they took you away. Never forgot you, she never. Always said a prayer for you on Sunday and hoped you’d marry and come back home again.”

Ludo swallowed hard and hugged Mrs Widdershins again, and this time she burst into tears.

“Oh. I knew you was unhappy,” she wailed. “I knew that horrid man didn’t treat you right, or else how would such a good boy have gone off and been so very wicked?”

She blushed and clamped her mouth shut, realising too late she’d just insulted the marquess and Ludo both, but Ludo only laughed.

“No, don’t stop there, Widdy. You’re right, of course. About all of it. I was a devilish fellow, to be sure, but I am home now, thank God, and I mean to behave, I promise. I must thank you, though, for never forgetting me and for keeping me in your prayers, and certainly for keeping the place so beautifully. It’s just how I remember it. And now, before I am accused of forgetting my manners entirely… this lovely creature is my wife. Bunty, please meet Mr and Mrs Widdershins. Mr and Mrs Widdershins, my wife, Lady Courtenay.”



Ludo was as enthusiastic as a boy whilst Widdy—as she insisted Bunty address her—showed them around the house. At every turn, Ludo exclaimed as some memory returned to him of his darling mama and the happy times they’d had here together. Bunty was overcome with joy for him, and so relieved that his memories had in no way been diminished or overshadowed by what had come next. He clearly felt no ill will towards his mother for the situation in which she had left him, despite how awful it had been. To Bunty, this showed just how good-hearted and generous her husband was and, impossibly, she felt herself fall more in love with him with every passing moment.

Bunty watched as he laughed with Widdy, recalling an incident when he’d eaten an entire tray of jam tarts and then sworn blind that he hadn’t despite the sticky evidence around his person that called him a liar.

“Ah, but you was sorry for it, and begged my pardon so nicely,” Widdy said, dabbing at her eyes with her apron. “I couldn’t be cross with you.”

Smiling, Bunty wondered if the Ratched sisters were having as lovely a time as she was, and if they would ever be so happy. How strange that their avaricious plans had turned out so wonderfully for her and Ludo. As it was Christmas, or very near, Bunty sent them a

silent thank you, for without them, she might never have married Ludo, and that would have been a tragedy.

Finally, Widdy showed them to their own room, the one that had once belonged to Ludo's mother.

"Well, I'll leave you be for a while, as I no doubt you're eager for me to do, if I know anything about newlyweds. There'll be a hot meal waiting for you in an hour, should you wish for it, but I shan't bat an eyelid if you don't. I'll leave tea and biscuits outside the door in the meantime, but I'll not disturb you again, my lord. Ring for me if you need aught, though."

"Thank you, Widdy," Ludo said, sending her such a warm smile that poor Widdy looked quite flustered. "For such a lovely welcome. I know we shall be very happy here."

"Ah, well. All is as it ought to be at last, my lord," Widdy said, dipping a curtsey before she left them alone and closed the door behind her.

Bunty watched as Ludo moved to the dressing table, touching perfume bottles and silver-backed brushes that must have belonged to his mother with reverent fingers. He lifted one of the crystal bottles and took out the stopper, lifting it to his nose, and smiled. Placing the bottle back with care, he stood by the window and looked out. The light was fading now, twilight settling upon the snow and leaving the landscape hushed and silent. Bunty moved to stand beside him, and he slid his arm about her waist, pulling her close.

"Over that way is Sedlescombe and Battle Abbey, and that way to Hastings. In the summer, we can go to the beach and you can sea bathe. Pevensey Bay is over there, where William the Conqueror landed. There was always a lot of society to be had here, too. A good community, or at least my mother found it so. I'm afraid you may struggle there, what with my black reputation to overcome."

"Nonsense," Bunty said briskly, not wanting anything to spoil his good humour, though there was truth in his words. "Soon enough, they'll see that you've turned over a new leaf and are a good husband and a wonderful man, and until then I am more than content to keep you all to myself."

"Are you?" he asked softly, touching her cheek with a fingertip. "For I don't doubt the rumours are flying already. The neighbourhood will be bracing itself for wild parties and tales of scandal and debauchery."

Bunty snorted.

"Well, they must content themselves with my scandal, and how I

trapped the wicked Lord Courtenay into marriage and tamed his wild heart. That should entertain them through Christmas at least." She moved closer to him and laid her head on his chest, hearing the reassuring thud of his heart. "And yes, you daft creature. I am in no need of society just yet. You are all I want for Christmas."

"I have always hated Christmas," he said his voice low. "Since mother died, at least. We had wonderful Christmases here. The house was filled with greenery and Widdy cooked up a storm. Mother helped her, too. She liked stirring the plum pudding, and I always put the charms in."

"Then let us have a Christmas like that," Bunty said, excitement bubbling through her at the idea. Christmas with her parents had always been a bit dull. It had been a blessing when her friend Freddie had been with them to add some fun to the proceedings. "We'll have a wonderful celebration, just as you did when you were a boy. We'll fill the house with food and laughter, and it will be the best Christmas ever. I can make you love it again, Ludo, I'm sure. With a little help, at least."

"I already do," he said, laughing now. "I love you, Bunty. My word, I love you so much I get these moments of sheer terror when I'm afraid I'll wake up and discover I dreamed it all."

Bunty stared at him, so touched by his words she could not speak for a moment.

"I'm no dream, Ludo," she said, pulling his head down for a kiss. She pulled back, whispering the words against his mouth. "I'll prove it to you."



Ludo's breath caught as Bunty pushed his coat from his shoulders, allowing it to fall to the floor in a heap before reaching for his waistcoat buttons. He'd meant what he'd said. Everything that had happened since he'd accepted that note had brought him such joy he lived in terror of losing it, of waking and finding it a dream, or of something crashing down upon him that would ruin everything. Yet, looking into Bunty's eyes and seeing her certainty, her confidence in him, he knew now that he was worrying for nothing. This was no dream. This wonderful woman, this home, this future… they were all his. He did not doubt that there would be challenges ahead. There would be difficulties, good days and bad days, for that was life and no one could escape its vagaries and quirks, but he could face it now. Such a short time ago, the world had looked bleak and lonely, and his efforts to change his life had seemed like climbing a mountain with one arm behind his back. Not now. Now he felt he could face anything

if Bunty was beside him, and she was. She always would be.

She'd made short work of his waistcoat and had flung his cravat across the room with a wicked grin. He watched, delighted by the anticipation in her eyes as she tugged his shirt from his breeches, and slid her hands under the fabric.

"Christ, your hands are cold!"

Ludo sucked in a breath as goosebumps chased over his skin, but she only laughed at him.

"Wicked creature," he murmured with affection. "Just see how I've corrupted you."

She nodded, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Indeed you have, my lord. Just think of all the dreadful things I've learned these past days in your company."

"And nights," he added gravely. "Don't forget the nights."

"Oh, Ludo," she said, her voice trembling with laughter. "I could never forget the nights."

She made him strip off the shirt, and then stood for a long moment, staring at his chest in a way that made Ludo feel like king of the world. He watched as she bit her lip, considering, and then moved towards him and rubbed her face over his chest like a cat, her hands caressing his skin as she sighed happily. He thought perhaps she might purr.

"Oh, I've wanted to do that for an age," she said, looking up as he quirked an eyebrow at her. "You're just so…."

"Hairy?"

"Well, yes, but… big and hot and… cuddly."

"Cuddly?" he repeated doubtfully. "I'm not a kitten."

She snorted at that. "Certainly not, though you rather make me feel like one, which is lovely."

He grinned at her, aware he must look smug, but the expression was swiftly wiped from his face as he realised she'd undone the fall on his trousers and was getting to her knees. Her fingers brushed through the trail of hair that arrowed down his belly to the thick thatch from which his arousal strained, begging for attention.

"I found a book when I was packing, Ludo," she said conversationally. "I'd never seen anything like it."

"Oh?" Ludo said, not paying much attention, not when her mouth was so close, her breath a teasing whisper of warmth over his taut skin.

“It had pictures.”

“Did it?” he murmured, before his mind snagged on the only book he had with pictures. “Oh!”

“Oh, indeed,” she said, though to his relief she did not sound disgusted, or cross, rather amused and curious.

“It was most… illuminating.”

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes, please. His brain kept up an internal monologue as she trailed a fingertip along the crease at the top of his thigh, making him shiver.

She leaned closer and her tongue darted out, giving him an experimental lick, and Ludo groaned. She did it again, and he held his breath. With excruciating tenderness, she took him into her mouth and sucked gently. He felt dizzy.

“You like that?” she asked, pleased.

Ludo whimpered.

There was a surprisingly naughty chuckle, and Ludo gave himself over to the most exquisite torture of his life as his wife practised the art of driving him out of his mind. She was a quick study, and it was an embarrassingly short time before his body grew tight, his mind blank and emptied of any thought except the pleasure she gave him.

“B-Bunty,” he said, trying to force her name out, to warn her, but his lust-addled brain could not form words. Ludo gave a hoarse cry and sank his hands into her hair, too far gone to stop, to do anything but give in to the orgasm that rolled through him with the force of a tidal wave.

It took him a long moment to come back to himself, leaning on the wall beside him to keep himself upright, for his knees felt ready to buckle. Dazed, he focused on his wife with difficulty, but did not miss the smug expression that curved her lush mouth as she looked up at him from under her lashes.

“My word,” Ludo managed, wondering if he might sit down for a moment. “I’ve created a monster.”

Bunty snorted and covered her mouth with the back of her hand, no doubt to cover up her delighted smile at having brought him practically to his knees.

“Don’t make out like you’re sorry,” she said, grinning at him.

Ludo gave in. He sat heavily down in the nearest chair and quickly divested himself of breeches and boots. He turned a wicked expression on his wife and shook his head. “Oh, no. Not the least bit sorry, love, but… turnabout is fair play.”

Bunty, correctly interpreting the look in his eyes, scrambled to her feet with a little shriek as Ludo lunged for her and swept her up into his arms and over one shoulder. Feeling rather like a caveman returning home with his spoils, he dumped her on the bed, where she bounced invitingly on the mattress before he climbed over her.

"L-Ludo," she said, wagging a warning finger at her. "If you m-make me scream, I'll never be able to leave this room, I'll be so mortified…."

"I always make you scream," he retorted, making short work of the buttons on her bodice. "And I can live with that. There seem to be advantages to keeping you in my bed at all hours."

"I'll never be able to look Mrs Widdershins in the eye again. Nor her husband!" she said, covering her face with her hands.

"You'll get over it," Ludo said placidly. "And the rest of the household will just have to get used to it. I may be married, but I have a reputation to uphold."

"Oh, you're—"

"Dreadful," he supplied for her, giving a happy sigh as he exposed her lovely breasts. "Wicked, depraved, utterly reprehensible…."

"Marvellous," Bunty said closing her eyes, a blissful curve to her lips. "The best, *best* husband anywhere in the world… ever."

Ludo cupped her breasts. *You lucky bastard*, he thought, grinning.

"So… you do want me to make you scream, then?" he asked, all innocence.

Bunty cracked open one eye. "Well, obviously. What are you waiting for, Christmas?"

Ludo gave a bark of laughter and shook his head. "Certainly not, love. I am yours to command. So… prepare yourself."

He flung her skirts over her head and wondered how his heart could contain everything he felt as Bunty laughed, and then squealed. She laughed louder still when he pressed a kiss to her stomach, then blew a wet raspberry against her skin. She squirmed and wriggled, and Ludo stared down at her in wonder.

"I love you," he said, serious for just a moment. "And this will be the best Christmas ever."

Bunty shook her head, smiling up at him, her dark eyes filled with adoration.

"No. Only the first of many best evers," she said.

Ludo nodded, seeing the certainty in her eyes and believing it.

“Our first best ever, then. The first of many,” he said.

Bunty nodded, and he moved up the bed to kiss her tenderly.

“I love you too, by the way,” she said, stroking his face. “In case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t,” he said, because he knew now, because he believed he was loved, and wanted, and belonged. “But don’t ever stop telling me.”

He kissed her again, long and slow, and then sat up, staring down at her with a devilish smile.

“Now then, where was I?”

“Making me scream?” Bunty suggested.

Ludo nodded gravely. “Ah, yes. Husbandly duties. Let’s see if we can melt all the snow on the roof, shall we?”

Ludo settled back to his work and, whilst they might not have melted *all* the snow, he certainly made his wife scream, and laugh, and love him all the more.

Epilogue

"Wherein there are roses at Christmas."



Five years later…

24th December 1825. Russell House, Kent.

Bunty looked around the dining room with satisfaction. The silver and crystal glittered in the light of the Yule candle that Ludo had lit for her at sunset, as tradition demanded. Her parents were here, having long since come to terms with her wedding Ludo. That their daughter's marriage was a success was something the most cynical of critics would have been hard pressed to deny. Ludo's business had gone from strength to strength, in no small part due to Bunty suggesting they give away some of the puzzles to the most elevated members of the *ton*. Ludo had been sceptical, remarking wryly that they were supposed to sell the things, not give them away, or he'd be bankrupt in short order. However, the tactic had worked marvellously, as those mamas who saw the likes of the Marchioness of Winterbourne's children playing happily with such a toy rushed out to get one for their own little darlings.

Ludo had also finally given in and allowed Bunty to send one of his paintings to Henry Barbour. The response from the man himself had been no surprise to Bunty, who had long been aware of her husband's many talents, but had stunned Ludo. To have such an acclaimed artist so thoroughly endorse his work had been the boost to his confidence he had needed, and he had agreed to submit a piece to the Royal Academy's summer exhibition. If Bunty had been any prouder, she would have crowed.

This Christmas they had a house full, having persuaded Mr and Mrs Middleton and their youngest daughter to come and stay. Mr Middleton's eldest four girls were now married and off his hands, and the man's relief was palpable. So only young Betsy remained. She was almost nineteen and would likely spend the entire holiday making sheep's eyes at Ludo, but Bunty could hardly blame the girl. Besides which, it would do her no good, for Ludo only had eyes for Bunty. It seemed extraordinary, especially after five years and three children, but he could find no fault with her and loved her to her bones. After so many years of finding fault with everything about herself, it was little short of miraculous to Bunty, and she never took his adoration for granted.

A blast of frigid air from the hallway announced his arrival home, and Bunty hurried out to greet him. Their eldest boy, Luca, had wide, dark eyes like his mother, and his father's thick dark curls and Mediterranean looks. The child was stamping his feet and leaving chunks of melting snow on the floor with a gleeful grin.

"Look, Mama," he said, holding out a fistful of mistletoe. "Papa said you'd have to kiss us if we brought some home."

Bunty laughed and ran to him, kissing him on his rosy cheek.

"As if you need mistletoe to get me to kiss either of you!" she exclaimed. "But it's very pretty. I shall put a red ribbon on it and hang it up for you."

"Oh, Master Luca, you look chilled through," his nurse said as she bustled into the hallway. "Let's get you in the bath and into clean clothes, quick smart, or you'll not be ready in time for dinner."

For once Luca needed no chivvying, as he'd seen the splendid feast Widdy had been preparing for days now.

"Baby is sleeping, and I'll bring Miss Rose down to say goodnight in a bit, my lady," the efficient Nurse Robinson informed Bunty, with a quick curtsey, before taking Luca's hand and leading him off for his bath.

Bunty turned back to her husband.

"And what about you?" she asked, smiling at him. "Do I need to get you into a hot bath before dinner?"

Ludo returned a pleased grin but shook his head.

"No. Or, at least, in a minute," he said. "I have something for you. Close your eyes."

Bunty laughed and did as he asked, knowing that Ludo would spoil her this Christmas, as he always did. He was forever bringing her presents no matter how often she reassured him she did not need them, but he seemed to enjoy making a fuss of her, and she was hardly going to complain.

"You can open them now."

Bunty gasped at the bouquet of Christmas roses he held out to her, and was at once transported back to their wedding night. He'd decorated his sparse rooms with Christmas roses for her, wanting to make the place welcoming for his new bride.

"Oh," Bunty said, taking them from him with care. "Oh, Ludo, they're so beautiful."

"We found them down near the woods," he said, his blue eyes alight with pleasure at having made her happy. "I'm going to get Mr

Widdershins to plant some in the garden, too, outside your parlour. Then you'll have them every Christmas."

Bunty blinked hard and sniffled. Ludo chuckled, pulling her into his arms, careful not to crush the roses.

"Don't cry."

"I'm not crying," she protested, as tears slid down her face.

Ludo touched her cheek and lifted his wet finger for her inspection.

"Proof positive. You're a proper watering pot these past days, anyone would think—"

He closed his mouth with a snap and took a step back, inspecting her.

Bunty huffed. "Oh, and now you've spoiled my surprise. I was going to tell you in the morning."

Ludo gave a crow of triumph and lifted her up into the air, spinning her around as Bunty shrieked. One of the downstairs maids came running to see what the commotion was about, saw them, blushed furiously, and darted away again.

"She's new," Ludo said, grinning. "She's not used to us yet."

Bunty snorted, wondering how she ever looked any of her staff in the eyes. Only the knowledge that they were all wildly jealous let her hold her head up.

"You're sure?" he asked, setting her down gently, one large hand moving to cup her cheek.

"I am," she said, smiling at him.

"How perfect," he said with obvious pleasure. "You are quite perfectly perfect."

Bunty made a sound of incredulity, but he smothered it, kissing her with slow and thorough attention until she remembered they were still standing in the hallway for all to see.

"That's enough," she protested half-heartedly. "Come along. You must get ready. Widdy will have your guts for garters if you make her spoil dinner. Besides which, I have something for you."

"Oh?" he said, waggling his dark eyebrows at her suggestively.

"Not *that*," she said, tsking at him. "There's not time for that though… later."

He sighed heavily, shaking his head with a mournful expression.

"Well, what is it, then? Nothing else will be half so exciting."

Bunty waited until he had closed the bedroom door before setting down her bouquet and handing him the letter which had been burning a hole in her pocket. Ludo stared at it and his eyes met hers.

"Well, open it, then," she said, praying it gave him the news he had been longing for.

Ludo tore open the seal and Bunty held her breath as he read, not daring to breathe until he looked up, his excitement palpable.

"It's from him… from my father. He… he wants to meet me."

Bunty gave a little shout of joy, for she knew what this meant to him. He laughed and pulled her close before turning his attention back to the letter.

"He's been travelling the past few years, which is why we've had such trouble finding him. He says…." Ludo swallowed and tried again. "He says my mother was the love of his life, and he is overjoyed to discover he has a son, and… he can't wait to meet me."

"Oh, Ludo, that's marvellous. I'm so happy for you."

Ludo nodded and set the letter down before tugging her back into his arms. "He says he'll come as soon as the weather improves."

"He'll be so proud of you, love," Bunty said, hugging him. "I know I am."

She watched him as he nodded, believing in himself now in a way he never had when she'd first met him.

"Do you believe in luck or fate?" he asked, frowning a little.

Bunty shrugged. "Perhaps, a little at least, but I think we make our own luck on the whole. Perhaps fate gives us a nudge now and then, but it's what we do with it that counts."

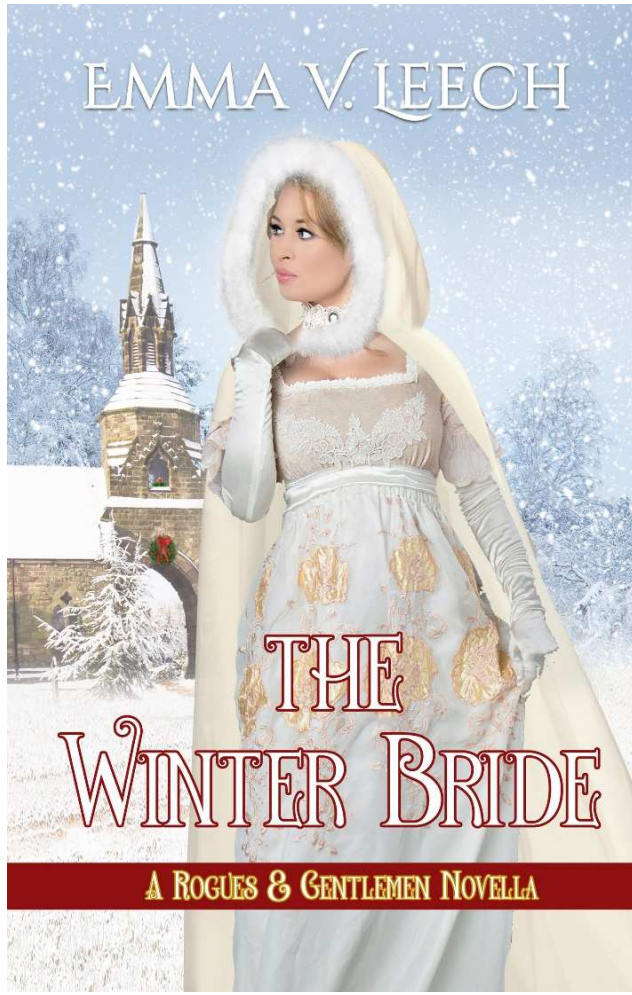
Ludo nodded and reached for one of the roses he'd picked, carefully threading it into her dark hair, behind her ear.

"Everything changed that night in the library. I'd never wanted anything like I wanted you, Bunty, so badly I could taste it. I'd have done anything to get you to marry me. When you practically landed in my lap…." He laughed, shaking his head. "I don't know if it was fate, or luck, but whatever it was I thank my lucky stars, every day, and certainly every night."

"I love you, Ludo," Bunty said, holding him tightly, staring up at him, her own heart echoing everything he had just said.

He touched his finger to the flower in her hair and smiled. "And I you, my own Christmas rose."

The Winter Bride



Chapter 1

"Wherein a lady's brother is a vile fiend."



12th November 1819. Burwash Weald, East Sussex, England.

The icy air bit hard as the fragile glint of daylight faded from the skies. Ned stared up at the low grey clouds for a moment before looking towards the farm. An uneven selection of barns and outbuildings clustered around the yard in front of the main house, which was solid and reassuring against the frozen backdrop. It was a handsome old place, half-timbered and red brick, crooked with age. It sat quietly in the harsh winter landscape, enduring the bitter season like everything else.

The light dusting of snow muted the heavy tread of Ned's boots as he trudged back home, and the kitchen window glowed like a beacon. It was the kind of day that made a man long to be inside and sitting beside a warm fire. Ned watched a pale plume of smoke from the huge brick chimney curl against the forbidding sky. Aye, the kitchen would be snug and cosy now.

He had that to look forward to, he reminded himself, though the Christmas season spread out before him like an empty field, barren in this winter scene, with every inch picked bare by crows.

With a sharp whistle, he called Rufus. The dog stopped snuffling about by the farm gate and hesitated for a moment before huffing and following him to the door. Ned stamped his feet, kicking the worst of the snow and muck free from his boots before taking them off and carrying them inside. Mrs Tucknott would have his hide if he walked dirty footprints through the house. For all she was half his size, even a bull of a man like Ned had a healthy respect for the woman's temper.

As he opened the door of the kitchen, scents of cooking and clean linen enveloped him, along with the ever-present tang of wood smoke that was as much a part of the old house's fabric as the timbers themselves.

"You've time to wash up," Mrs Tucknott said, nodding a greeting to him as she laid the table for his dinner.

"Right."

Ned took himself off to wash and change out of his work clothes. They never had much in the way of conversation, but it was nice to

have another living soul in the house, just to know they were there.

Once he was presentable and in no danger of getting a scolding, Ned returned to the kitchen and Mrs Tucknott served him a huge bowl of steaming lamb stew. A fresh loaf, with three thick slices ready cut, sat on the table with the butter dish, along with a bowl of potatoes and another of cabbage. Ned's stomach growled with appreciation.

The sound of a horse and cart clattering into the yard outside announced the arrival of Mr Tucknott, and the housekeeper undid her apron and folded it with brisk, efficient movements.

"Mr Hardy, are you quite certain—?"

Ned sighed and held up a hand. "We've discussed it, Mrs Tucknott. Go visit your daughter. It's three years since ye last went to Scotland, and her with the new bairn. You've filled the pantry fit to bursting. I won't starve."

"I know that," she said with a huff and folded her arms.

Ned regarded her. She was a little bird of a woman, with eyes as bright and dark as a robin's. She was every bit as territorial, too.

"What, then?"

"Don't seem right," she said, her sharp features softening in an uncharacteristic show of emotion. "'Twas all right to go when the missus lived, but now…."

Ned sighed. His wife had been dead nearly two years now and Mrs Tucknott had gotten some romantic notion about him being heartbroken. Strange how such a no-nonsense woman could get such a maggoty idea into her head, but there you were.

It was true that Ned had sunk into a depression in the months after Sarah died, but not for the reasons Mrs Tucknott believed.

No one knew what a fool Ned had been, that Sarah had seduced him and tricked him into marrying her, telling him she was pregnant after one careless, drunken fumble together. There was no child and never had been in the ten years they'd been married. It hadn't been a tender relationship. Ned couldn't trust her after that initial betrayal, and Sarah had never seemed to care much. She even said so. She had what she wanted—the farm, security, and comfort—and, apparently, that was enough.

Not that she hadn't worked. She'd been fit and strong and had helped run the farm, pulling her weight and more besides, but there had been no love, no affection. Even when Ned had tried to make a friend of her, realising they were tied till death did them part, Sarah had no interest in him, even less so in the physical side of their

relationship. She did her wifely duty, but took no pleasure in it, so Ned could find none either.

When she died, he'd felt numb. Anger was there, that she'd gone and they'd nothing to show for it, but it was more regret for what might have been, if either of them had been different people. Where was he to meet another woman now, what with the farm to run? Even if his marriage hadn't made him wary of trying again, Sarah had sapped his confidence in himself and others. Though he knew he must, the will to try again was hard to muster. Empty years yawned before him and made his chest ache with loneliness.

"Mrs Tucknott, I will still be here when ye get back, and I've Rufus for company. Rachel has invited me for Christmas Day, and I'll likely stay on a day or two after."

The woman sighed, something like relief in her eyes, though she still looked troubled.

"You'll write and tell your sister you'll be going, then?" she said, with a note of suspicion.

Ned applied himself to his dinner and nodded. He didn't like to say a barefaced lie out loud.

"I suppose yon farmhands will take care of the place in the meantime?" she added, still sounding a little unconvinced.

"Reckon so."

"Well, if you're sure."

"I'm sure," Ned replied, helping himself to potatoes.

Mrs Tucknott nodded and shrugged into her coat before putting on her hat and wrapping a thick shawl about her shoulders. "I wish that girl of mine hadn't married a bloody Scot," she grumbled. "The journey is a terrible trial to my old bones. Well, then, I'll be off. I made the plum pudding and set it in the pantry. You'll be wanting to feed it a drop of something every day, and it'll be good and rich."

"Aye," Ned agreed, not looking up from his dinner.

"I'll see you in the new year then, Mr Hardy."

"That ye will." He looked up and nodded, letting out a breath of relief when she closed the door behind her.

Ned glanced over to where Rufus was stretched out in front of the fire.

"Just us now, lad," he said, and returned his attention to his dinner.

Ned woke with a start as Rufus howled and barked, the sound loud enough to wake the dead in the pitch dark of the freezing night.

"What the devil…?" Ned muttered, flinging back the bed covers with regret and fumbling about with the tinderbox.

He lit the candle as quickly as he could and hurried down the stairs. Rufus didn't make a fuss for no reason, and it was a cruel winter. The last thing he needed was some poor bastard trespassing hoping to steal a hen, or worse.

"What is it, boy?" he said, stopping in his tracks as he heard a faint knock. Rufus barked again, scratching at the door and whining.

Who in the name of Heaven would be out at such an unholy hour on a night like this?

Ned snapped his fingers and pointed, and Rufus stopped at once, moving back to sit beside his master as directed. Too late, Ned realised he was only in his nightshirt, but there was no help for that now. He set the candle down on the windowsill so both his hands were free and opened the door, wondering what on earth to expect.

The sight that greeted him was so unexpected that he was almost too slow to react. He had a brief glimpse of a face so beautiful it might have been that of an angel, and then the woman crumpled. He reacted in the instant before she hit the ground and caught her, the awkward stance taking him to his knees as he laid her down, though she weighed nothing at all. There was the rustle of silk, and the scent of roses drifted from her skin. Ned stared down, wondering if he was dreaming.

Rufus whined and sniffed the woman, giving her cheek a swift lick.

"Aye, she's cold," Ned said.

The blue tinge to her lips was visible even in the faint light of the candle. He stood, lifting her with him and kicking the door shut as he carried her back into the kitchen, where it was still warm.

For a moment he stood in the dark room, wondering what the hell to do next, before setting her down carefully on the chair by the fire. His heart was thudding and, though he was desperate to take another look at her, he set his attention to the fire, stirring up the embers and coaxing the flames back to life. Once it was burning well, he hurried back to fetch the candle and lit the lamps so that they suffused the room with a warm glow.

When he returned to her, holding the lamp high, Ned's breath snagged in his throat. Skin as fine and white as porcelain greeted his gaze, while the lamplight danced upon the gold of her hair. The

sudden shock of her beauty in the endless grey of his day-to-day life was like being struck in the head. He felt dazed. She was young, too; barely twenty at a guess.

"Holy God," he murmured as he looked her over.

Her clothes were fine, finer than anything he'd ever seen. A lady, then. What was a beautiful young lady doing out alone on a night like this?

He took in the snow-caked, sodden boots, and the soaked hem of her dress and petticoats. The clothes might cost more than he'd see in a year, but they weren't suitable for tramping about in such weather. She must be frozen to the bone.

Hell and damnation. What was he to do? He needed to get the wet clothes off her before she froze to death, but if she woke and he was in the middle of disrobing her… *a lady*? What if she thought he was attacking her? She'd be terrified. His blood ran cold at the idea, more so as he imagined accusations from those male relations who ought to be looking after her. Where was her father, her brother… her husband?

Just being here, alone with him, could ruin her.

He stiffened as she stirred, her eyelashes fluttering, and Ned saw blue. It was like a glimpse of a kingfisher whisking across a lake in summer.

She sighed and opened her eyes. Ned took a step back as she gasped and sat up, staring around her.

"It's all right," he said, holding his hands in front of him. "I won't do ye no harm."

She clutched the arms of the chair, her breathing coming hard and fast, panic a living thing in the blue of her eyes. "Did… did they follow me? Are they looking for me?"

Ned frowned, disturbed by her terror. He took a step forward, all his protective instincts bristling. "Who, lass? Who followed ye?"

The young woman clutched the chair so hard her knuckles turned white as her anxious gaze took in the room.

"There's no one here but me and Rufus," Ned said, keeping his voice gentle.

"R-Rufus?" she asked, forcing the word past the chattering of her teeth.

The bloodhound shambled forward at the sound of his name, head down and wagging his tail as he pushed his nose against her skirts.

"That's Rufus," Ned said, relieved to see the panic dim a little in

the vivid sapphire of her gaze. “There was no one else with ye. We’re off the beaten track here; miles from anyone, really. You’re lucky ye found us. There’s nowt else in this direction once ye leave the road.”

She nodded and clutched her arms about herself, shivering in earnest.

“Ye need to get warm,” he said, wondering how to say what was obvious without sounding as if he had nefarious intentions. “Your clothes are wet, and your boots too, but I’ve got no wife here and my housekeeper is gone until the new year. I’ve got no woman here to help ye.” Ned hesitated. “I’m widowed, but… I still have some of my wife’s clothes. If I fetched them for ye, could ye… by yourself?”

He made a vague gesture towards her and wasn’t certain whether or not he was relieved by the blush that stained her cheeks, but she nodded.

“Good,” Ned said, letting out a breath of relief. “Good, I’ll… I’ll fetch them.”

Thankful to have something to do, Ned hurried back up the stairs and opened the trunk where Sarah’s clothes were. He grabbed an assortment of items and went back downstairs with them, to find her struggling with the laces of her boots. She’d already cast aside her sodden pelisse and bonnet, and her wet gloves were steaming before the fire.

“I can’t get them undone,” she said, looking up from her boots, a tremor to her voice that made Ned’s heart clench.

“I….” He stared down at the dainty little feet just visible beneath the hem of her gown. “I can… if….”

She nodded and turned her face to the fire, the flush creeping up her neck suggesting she was too embarrassed to look at him.

Ned set down the bundle of clothes and tucked the quilt from his bed around her shoulders. Then he knelt and took hold of her foot, almost setting it down again when he heard her sharp intake of breath. He froze, staring up at her. She glanced back at him and gave a taut nod.

Moving slowly, as though he was tending something wild that might bolt at any moment, Ned turned his attention to her boots, if that was what you could call such silly bits of nothing. Made of the finest kid, they were saturated and offered no protection from the elements. The laces were soaked too, and the knots too tight to work free. Ned’s fingers were too big and clumsy to undo them and so he slid his fingers beneath the knot on either side and wrenched it until the lace snapped.

“Sorry,” he said, as she jolted. He held up his hands, showing her the large, work roughened digits. “My hands weren’t made for such delicate work,” he said with a rueful smile, hoping to reassure her.

Her blue eyes widened, and she turned away at once, staring back at the flames.

Ned frowned and returned his attention to her frivolous boots. He took off the first with great care and experienced a wash of heat at the sight of the little foot within, clad in the finest of silk stockings. His body stirred, the sudden flare of need shocking after so many years of forcing such feelings to leave him be, for fear of his unanswered desires driving him mad.

Her skin was like ice, the stockings wet and clinging to her. The touch of her slender foot on his thigh sent shivers running over him that had nothing to do with her cold toes. At this point, Ned realised with a jolt of appalled embarrassment that he was only wearing his nightshirt. Beneath the thankfully loose and commodious shirt, his cock was in danger of making itself known, eager to be compensated for all the years of neglect. Telling his suddenly ungovernable breeding organs that they were disgusting and contemptible when the poor woman was obviously in desperate straits, he returned to the job at hand and tried his damnedest to act like a gentleman.

Once she was warm, he’d go and make himself respectable. The icy temperature of the foot resting on his thigh seared through his nightshirt, but he ignored it. The woman gave a little cry of pain as he drew off her other boot.

“Are ye hurt?” he asked, looking up at her in concern.

She shook her head, though her eyes glittered with tears. “N-No,” she said, and he had to lean in to hear her answer it was so faint. “J-Just s-so cold.”

Ned’s heart ached for her. “If I turn away, can ye undo the garters?” he asked, feeling heat sweep up his throat and his nether regions twitch with interest. “The stockings are wet through. You’ll catch your death, and….”

She nodded, blushing just as fiercely as he was. Ned turned his back and tried not to listen to the rustle of silk as she lifted her skirts and removed the stockings.

“The petticoats….” he ventured, wishing his voice didn’t sound so rough.

“Yes,” she said, and Ned closed his eyes at the sound of material slithering to the ground. *Don’t think about it,* he scolded himself. *Don’t even dare, ye miserable cur.*

He took a breath, keeping his back to her. “What’s your name, miss?”

“M-Miss Honeyfield,” she said through chattering teeth. “G-Grace Honeyfield.”

Ned smiled at that. The name was so perfect he couldn’t help the way his lips curved at the sound of it. Forcing himself to concentrate, he spoke again.

“You’re safe here, Miss Honeyfield,” he said, hoping he sounded reassuring. “I don’t know what you’re running from, but I won’t let no one hurt ye, and you’ve nowt to fear from me. I promise. I’ve never laid a hand on a woman what didn’t want me to, and I don’t mean to start now. You’ll get warm, have something to eat, and get some rest. Ye may take my bed… I’ll sleep down here. In the morning we can see what’s to be done.”

There was a long silence. Ned could hear nothing above the sound of his heart thudding and the crackle of the flames as the fire grew stronger.

“You’re very kind, Mr…?”

“Hardy,” he said, his name spoken on a breath of relief. “Edward Hardy, but most folks call me Ned.”

“You can turn around now, Mr Hardy.”

He did so, the breath chased from his lungs once more at seeing such a beautiful woman sitting in his chair, by his hearth. She was shivering, though, clutching the quilt about her and Ned cursed himself, suddenly terrified of what might happen if she took ill. She looked too fine, too well-bred to resist any kind of ailment.

“We need to get ye warm.”

He moved instinctively, as if she was a newborn lamb, fighting for life and helpless in his hands. Sinking to his knees before her, he reached for one of his wife’s petticoats. The fabric was worn, nothing like the lacy bits of finery that had puddled on the floor in front of the fire. Ned forced himself not to look at them, not to allow the excess of femininity to distract him from the task of warming her. She needed help, like any of the creatures in his keeping, and he’d give it—for her own good—and damn him to perdition if he enjoyed it too much.

He took hold of one foot, ignoring her gasp of shock as he wrapped it in the soft cloth of the petticoat and began to gently rub her toes.

“Mr Hardy!” she exclaimed.

“Hush, lass,” he said, concentrating on bringing warmth back to

her feet. “Once your feet are warm, the rest of ye will follow.”

At first, she was still and unyielding beneath his hands, and he dared not look up for fear of what he’d see in her eyes. Little by little, though, she relaxed, the tension easing out of her as he rubbed and massaged first one foot, then the next. It was painfully intimate, and Ned stamped on the surge of longing that rose inside him, the desire to keep such a beautiful creature near him. It was so long since he’d touched a woman.

He’d been faithful to his wife and not looked elsewhere, despite her lack of interest in him. Ned had made her a vow, and he took such things seriously. Since then… well, perhaps he was a coward, but he’d been wary of trying again. He knew he could take another wife. There were women who would be eager enough to take on a successful farmer, yet did they really want him? Though he knew it was foolish if he married again, he wanted it to be different, he wanted to be loved.

Yet Miss Honeyfield’s beauty was the kind that could give a fellow dangerous ideas and make a man act the fool, but she was a lady, and in trouble. She certainly wasn’t interested in such a low-born fellow as he was. He wasn’t fit to touch her, though he wasn’t beyond wishing he were.

“Is that better?” he asked, his voice too loud after such a long silence, even though he’d pitched it low so as not to startle her.

“Much, thank you.”

He glanced up then to find her watching him and he remembered again that he was in his nightshirt.

“Perhaps you can manage to change the rest of your things?” he suggested. “I… I’d better….” Ned looked away from her and gestured to his nightshirt with a grimace. “I’ll leave ye be for a moment. I won’t come in again without knocking first.”

“Thank you,” she said again, and he felt the words sink into his skin.

She was so softly spoken, her accent so cultured, that her voice seemed sweet and musical to his ear.

Ned nodded and hurried out of the room.

Chapter 2

"Wherein an unhappy life and a perilous future are revealed."



Grace fumbled with the fastenings of the dress. Without the petticoats, the damp silk clung to her legs and made her shiver, despite the blaze of the fire at her back. Her feet had at least regained some feeling, though how that had been achieved was so shocking she couldn't think on it.

When she'd woken from her swoon to see the towering figure looming over her, she'd almost screamed. For a moment he'd looked like the devil himself, with that thick black hair and the heavy dark eyebrows winging over his eyes. His eyes were dark too, brown or black she wasn't sure, but she wasn't afraid of him now, though he was the biggest man she'd ever seen. There was kindness in his manner, in the way he treated her, and she felt instinctively that he was no wicked seducer of innocents. Far from it.

She knew what the devil looked like—how he sounded, too—and it wasn't Edward Hardy.

The dress slithered to the floor, and she fought the urge to consign it to the flames. Harold had chosen it, decking her out in finery to go to her new owner, for that was what Mr Carrington would be, for all that he would pay her brother to marry her.

Harold would have his debts paid off and a nice lump sum to fritter away, like everything else that passed through his hands. He didn't care that Mr Carrington would beat his wife, just as he beat his dogs and his horses; neither did he care that Carrington was cruel and perverse, and had already tried to take what he felt to be his right. She stifled a sob as she remembered his wet mouth pressing down upon hers, and forced the memory away.

No. She'd fought him that day, and she'd bought herself time. She'd done so again today… but for how long?

Grace shivered in her chemise and started at the sound of a knock at the door. She snatched up the quilt and wrapped herself in it.

"Yes," she said.

Mr Hardy came back in, dressed this time, and so Grace felt more able to look at him. It had been indecent before, with him in just his nightshirt. She'd been far too aware of the heat of his hands, the

strength in his powerful body. When he'd stood up before the fire and turned his back to give her privacy, his body had been a silhouette within the nightshirt. She'd never seen such a man before, such a masculine physique. The thought of what he could do if he chose had made her tremble. She'd come to know of late what the blow of a cruel hand felt like, and this man's hands were far larger, his body far more powerful than her brother's. She'd not been able to stop staring at him, torn between fascination and terror, but when he'd spoken, reassuring her of her safety, his voice had been gentle. Grace had never experienced gentleness from a man before. She knew it was possible, had clung to the belief that one day she'd find such a man and escape. In her mind she'd held tight to a different future. In that world, Christmas was a joyful time filled with love and the noisy chaos of a family, of children, of a man who loved her as she loved him, but Harold had taken that last hope from her.

The men she knew best were cruel; the ones that ought to have protected her were to be feared and obeyed. Her father had been a man to fear, not because he beat her, but for the way he mocked and controlled and kept her isolated from the world. Her brother was not so inventive, and since her father died and she'd become his property, his cruelty arrived on the end of a fist. Yet this man who was twice their size, with his rough hands and uncultured voice—a man strong enough to crush her brother with ease—he'd promised her safety.

I won't let no one hurt ye, and you've nowt to fear from me.

He'd said that, and she'd believed him. Perhaps she was a gullible fool, but her instincts told her otherwise. Even the dog who obeyed his master without hesitation looked at him with adoration, not with fear.

I've never laid a hand on a woman what didn't want me to, and I don't mean to start now.

She blushed as she remembered those words, wondering who the woman had been who'd wanted him to touch her. His wife, she supposed.

"Are ye warmer?" he asked, and Grace smiled at the depth of his voice, the gruff quality that was somehow soothing. Her brother would consider his accent rough and ugly, but it seemed soft-edged to her, the country burr reassuring.

"I am, thank you."

He looked down at the pile of clothes on the floor and frowned. "I came down too soon," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm sorry."

“It’s all right.”

He gave a little huff of laughter and looked up at her. “Truth be told, I… I thought perhaps I’d dreamed ye. I expected to come down and find the place empty.”

“I’m afraid not,” she said, frowning as guilt sat heavy in her chest for the trouble she was putting him to.

He smiled at that, and Grace stared at the way it transformed his face from something harsh and a little forbidding into an almost boyish expression.

“Don’t be sorry,” he said. “It’s the most excitement me and Rufus have had in… well, ever,” he said, tugging at the dog’s ears. The hound closed his eyes with an expression of bliss. “We thought you was a Christmas angel.” He looked awkward at the admission and rubbed the back of his neck again. “I’ll… er… go to the pantry and find something for ye to eat and give ye time to….”

He made a gesture towards the pile of clothes and took himself off again.

Grace watched him go and then reached for the clothes he’d brought her. Nothing fit. Whoever his wife had been, she’d been a deal taller and built with more generous proportions. Still, she dressed as best she could, and stared down at herself in chagrin.

“Are ye decent?” he called from the pantry.

Grace sighed. Well, at least everything was covered. “Yes.”

He came back in, holding a heavy tray, and stopped in his tracks when he saw her. She could only imagine what she looked like, dressed in clothes that were far too big for her, like a child trying to act like an adult. It was an apt enough description. Her father and brother had always treated her like a child, and she’d had no choice but to allow it, no matter how it rankled. It was better than being locked in her room, or slapped, or worse.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, and his harsh features softened. “Sarah was a deal bigger than ye, eh, and not half so elegant?”

“I’m grateful for dry clothes, Mr Hardy, I assure you.”

He nodded, put the tray down on the kitchen table, and pulled out a chair for her.

“Come and eat,” he said. “It will help to warm ye. I’ll heat some soup, too.”

“There’s no need to go to such trouble—”

“’Tis no trouble, though it’ll not be what you’re used to.”

“Good,” she replied with some force, startling herself as much as him. She blushed and looked away, busying herself with cutting a slice of cheese from the platter he’d set down.

The food was excellent. Perhaps it was simply the relief at being safe and warm, but Grace had tasted nothing so wonderful in her life. The cheese was sharp and crumbly, and there were generous slices of ham with a rich smoky flavour. Mr Hardy returned to the table, covered a huge slice of brown bread with thick, creamy butter, and handed it to her. Grace stared at it for a moment before tearing off a small corner. She closed her eyes as she chewed and sighed with pleasure.

“My housekeeper, Mrs Tucknott, is an excellent baker,” he said, his rumbling voice recalling her to the table and her manners.

“She is,” she said, smiling. “I can make bread too,” she added, with no little pride, before blushing as she realised how foolish she sounded. “It’s the only thing I can make.” The amendment was made with rather more humility as she realised such a boast would hardly impress him. “And not as well as this.”

“I didn’t know such fine ladies could cook.”

Grace looked down at her plate. “My father and brother wouldn’t approve,” she admitted, as a prickle of fear slithered down her back. “But our cook was a God-fearing woman and didn’t approve of idleness. I’d get lonely all by myself when everyone was away, so I would spend time in the kitchens for company. I pestered her into teaching me.”

She looked up to find him staring at her hands and slid them under the table, disconcerted by the quality of his gaze. He got up then and went to the fireplace, ladling out a bowlful of soup for her before setting it down on the table with a spoon.

“That will warm ye up,” he said, pushing the bowl towards her with an encouraging smile.

Grace remembered how he’d warmed her so far and felt the heat scald her cheeks as she averted her gaze from his face. It had felt good, the sure touch of his hands on her feet, warming her so gently. She dared another glance at him, intrigued by this rough fellow, who was far more civilised than the men she knew, men who would claim to be above Mr Hardy. They believed themselves of a higher rank, *gentlemen*, and Grace wondered at the nature of a word that could describe a man who was anything but gentle.

The man beside her fitted the true meaning better than any she’d met before.

“I’m sorry. My manners won’t be what you’re used to,” he said, sitting back in his chair.

The words had been gruff and apologetic, and Grace realised he had misinterpreted her blush.

“No,” she said, forcing herself to meet his eyes. “They’re not. You’re by far the kindest and most well-mannered person I’ve ever met.”

He frowned at that, curiosity and concern colouring his expression as he leaned towards her. The lamplight caught his eyes and Grace could see that they were brown, a deep, rich colour like chocolate, and flecked with gold. *A kind man,* said a hopeful voice in her head*, one that won’t hurt you.*

“When ye arrived, ye asked if *they’d* followed. Ye were frightened out of your wits. Who was it, lass? Who had ye running through the dark all alone on a night like this?”

Grace hesitated. From what she could see of the house she sat in, it was as neat as a pin and well kept. The man’s clothes were not those of a gentleman, but they were good quality. A farmer he might be, but he appeared to be a successful one. Would money tempt a man like this? Would he return her to her brother, hoping to gain a reward? The idea made her heart skip and her stomach clench, and she jolted as he reached for her hand and covered it with his own.

“I’ll not let anyone hurt ye,” he said, his words fierce, a promise in them that she wanted to believe. “Not even if they’re your kin. You have my word.”

She tore her gaze from the massive hand holding hers with such tenderness to stare up at him. Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked hard.

“Ah, don’t cry,” Ned murmured, raising his other hand to wipe away a tear that spilled down her cheek with his thumb.

Grace gasped at the intimacy of his touch and he sat back at once, withdrawing both hands and looking mortified. “I’m sorry. Please, forgive me. I… I ought not have—”

“No,” she said in a rush, regretting the loss of his warm hand and the promise of safety. “No, I’m… I’m not offended, only… surprised. I’m not used to such—”

“Aye,” he said, sounding disgusted. “Like I said, I’m no gentleman, and my manners aren’t what you’ll be used to.”

“You’ve been a perfect gentleman, Mr Hardy, but like I told you, I’m not used to such *kindness*,” Grace said, determined he not

misunderstand her.

He looked puzzled by that and leaned a little towards her once more. “But a woman of such beauty, surely you’ve men tripping over themselves to be kind to ye?”

She stared at him. He thought her beautiful. The idea made something warm and fluttery uncurl inside her. “My father did not let me socialise. He… He was a solitary man and preferred to live quietly. He died in September, and since then my brother… m-my brother—”

Her breathing picked up at thoughts of her brother, her heart speeding in her chest, and she felt giddy as panic overtook her.

“Hush, lass,” Mr Hardy said.

She gasped and gasped, but no air seemed to reach her lungs.

He moved, getting to his knees before her and taking both of her hands in his. “Look at me,” he commanded, and there was such force behind the words there was no possible way she could do anything else. “You’re safe here,” he said, squeezing her hands. “You’re safe.”

Grace nodded as her heart settled at his reassurance, her breathing slowing a little.

“H-He’ll c-come for me,” she said, trying to keep the panic at bay.

“Your brother?”

She nodded, holding onto his hands far harder than he held hers, as if he was her lifeline, the only thing keeping her from sliding into dark waters.

“You’re afraid of him?”

Grace nodded again, fighting not to cry.

Mr Hardy frowned at that, his expression troubled. “We’d have to hide you if he came,” he said, and she could tell he was uncomfortable with the idea. “He’s your legal guardian, is he not?”

“Yes,” she said, knowing it was unavoidable.

If Mr Hardy didn’t want to bother himself with her, if she caused him too much trouble, it would be easier to hand her back. She belonged to her brother, after all… until she was married.

Her heart gave an uneven lurch in her chest.

“Why does he frighten you so much?” Mr Hardy asked, still holding her hands. “Does he…?”

He paused as his gaze fell to where their hands were clasped. She’d rolled up the sleeves of the shirt, as they were too long, and one was pushed farther up her arm than the other, exposing bruises, dark and angry against her pale skin.

Mr Hardy grew very still.

Grace withdrew her hands from his and tugged at the sleeve, covering the bruises, shame rising within her. Perhaps he'd believe she'd deserved it. She'd been sitting holding his hands, a man she'd just met. She was alone with him. Perhaps he'd think….

Mr Hardy took her hand back and pushed the sleeve up again, his eyes fixed on the bruises. "He do that?" he asked, his voice low.

Grace nodded and her heart skipped at the way his expression darkened.

"Why?" he demanded. "What excuse did he give for laying hands on ye in such a way? For I tell ye now, Miss Honeyfield, there's no excuse, none in the world other than that the man who calls himself your kin is a vile brute."

She stared at him in wonder. No one had ever taken her part before. No one had ever stood up for her. They were too afraid of her father while he lived, and then Harold.

"My brother, Harold, is in debt," she said, trying to calm herself enough to explain. "My father's estate was not as wealthy as he'd supposed, and the inheritance he'd relied upon not enough to support his lifestyle. The property is entailed and so… and so—"

Mr Hardy covered her hand within his and she thrummed with the awareness of the strength held within the man before her, strength he was trying to lend her, to make her brave. "It's all right. Tell me. I'll help ye, I swear I will."

Grace stared at him, at the sincerity in his eyes.

"He arranged a marriage for me, with a man who has always… he's always…." She took a breath, encouraged by the warmth of his hand, by the firm clasp of his fingers around hers. It ought to shock her, appal her, this dreadful lapse of propriety— with his rough hand holding hers, without even gloves between them—and it *was* rather shocking, but it also made her feel safe and protected. That was too novel and wonderful a sensation to give up lightly. It made her believe he meant what he said to her. "He was a friend of my father's, m-much older than me, and—"

"Ye don't like him?"

Grace shook her head, trying hard not to become hysterical at the idea she *didn't like* Mr Carrington.

"You're afraid of him?"

She nodded this time. "H-Harold is a b-brute, like you said, but Mr C-Carrington—"

"*Carrington*?" he said, his eyes going wide. "God above, your brother would wed ye to Carrington?"

He got to his feet, cursing under his breath and Grace knew that was it. Of course he would know Mr Carrington. He was one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the region. He'd not want anything to do with her now.

"I-I'm sorry," she said, her heart returning to the bleak place that had sent her tumbling from a carriage in the dead of night and running into the icy darkness. "I ought not have involved you in my troubles, but… if you could just give me directions to the nearest town, and then perhaps I could—"

He swung back around, staring at her in consternation. "What?" he said, so obviously bewildered that her heart skipped a little with hope. "Ye think I would leave ye to the wolves? To a man like Carrington? Good Christ, what manner of man do ye think me?" he demanded, so obviously offended she could only stare up at him and fight the sudden urge to fling herself into his arms.

This man, whom she did not know and who owed her nothing, had shown her more compassion in the past hour than she'd known her whole life.

"I think you quite the kindest person I've ever met," she said.

Pity filled his eyes, and he returned to crouch before her. "That's likely the saddest thing I ever heard," he said, with such regret in his voice her throat tightened.

He rubbed a hand over his face and let out a long, slow breath.

"Mr Carrington is a cruel man," he said, after a pause. "I'd not give a dog into his keeping, let alone a woman."

Grace made a pitiful sound as the breath she'd been holding escaped her and he smiled, shaking his head.

"I promised ye safety and I meant it. Trouble is, how to achieve it."

She swallowed, praying he'd come to the same conclusion she had, though the idea filled her with both alarm and anticipation.

He looked her in the eyes and Grace felt herself held in the depths of that warm gaze, in the promise of safety she saw there.

"There's only one way I can keep ye safe, lass, for your brother owns ye, body and soul, and I can do nothing to stop him if he discovers ye here with me. There'll be the most god-awful scandal too, for ye must know your reputation will be ruined if anyone found out you've been alone with me this night."

She nodded, her breath coming fast.

There was a long, taut, silence, and she sensed he was fighting some internal battle.

“I’m no prize, Miss Honeyfield,” he said quietly. “I’m no gentleman, and I’m a deal older than you myself. I can’t afford to give ye fine dresses and jewels. You’ll be an outcast to your own kind, and no doubt folk of my station won’t welcome ye. Neither fish nor fowl, ’tis what you’ll be….” He hesitated, before getting to one knee and taking her hand between both of his. “But I promise ye safety, and that I’ll never lay a hand on ye in anger, nor ever touch ye if ye don’t welcome it. I’d do everything in my power to make ye happy, though I know that isn’t much to offer a lady like yourself, but, if ye think ye might bear it, to keep ye safe, I’d be honoured if ye would marry me, Miss Honeyfield.”

Grace stared at him, searching his face for any signs of duplicity or guile, but found nothing but the doubt in his eyes, and she realised he expected her to reject him. Was she a fool to trust in his promises so easily? Yet, what choice was there, and it appeared her heart—foolish thing that it was—had not given up hope after all.

“Yes,” she said, breathless with the enormity of what she was doing. “Yes, I would marry you, Mr Hardy.”

His astonishment was enough to make her lips curve upwards, and then as he realised she would not change her mind, he smiled. The expression transformed his face. It was devastating, that smile, and Grace felt quite winded. He was a handsome man, her husband-to-be.

Her husband!

Good heavens.

“I’m four and thirty,” he said, sounding a little defensive.

“I’m three and twenty,” she replied, amused that he might worry about his age.

She’d never in her life seen such a virile specimen of masculinity. That she would soon be this man’s wife sent heat rushing beneath her skin. He let out a breath when she told him her age, and she knew it relieved him to discover that she wasn’t quite as young as she looked.

“The place won’t be what ye’re used to,” he said, the doubt creeping back into his eyes. “And I’m not a sociable fellow myself. I live quietly and—”

Grace took the hand that held hers. Though her heart was beating frantically in her chest, she dared to hold it to her cheek and smile at him. “I am honoured by your proposal, Mr Hardy, and to have a home

of my own and a man who will be kind to me, that is all I have ever dreamt of."

He was staring at her, his eyes dark, a slight flush of colour at his cheeks.

"I'd think this was just a dream," he said, with a huff of laughter, "except I've not the imagination to conjure a woman as beautiful as you."

Pleasure unfurled within her at his words, and then all her fragile hopes shattered as a heavy fist pounded at the door.

Chapter 3

“Wherein a monster tracks his prey.”



Ned jolted out of the trance in which he’d been. The way she’d held his rough hand to her silken cheek was enough to make heat surge beneath his skin and his brain turn to mush… but the violence of the hammering at his door told him she’d been right to be afraid.

He looked at her. Her eyes were wide with terror, her skin as white as the landscape beyond the door, and she trembled before him. Fury rose in his chest and a protective instinct so overwhelming he wanted to murder whoever had frightened her so and caused her such pain. Yet he couldn’t do anything of the sort. He must do nothing to raise suspicion. Not yet. Not until they were wed.

He put a finger to his lips, and she nodded. Ned moved fast, collecting her discarded clothes and tugging at her hand. He led her up the stairs, where he stuffed her clothes into the first drawer that came to hand and lifted the lid of the huge chest that stood at the end of his bed.

To her credit, she understood at once and stepped into it, curling herself into a ball. It broke his heart to make her suffer the indignity, but he promised himself—once she was his wife and no one could take her away from him—he’d make her brother pay. He hesitated for the barest moment to touch a finger to her cheek.

“Trust me,” he said, before closing the lid.

The hammering had grown louder, and Ned hurried back downstairs to where Rufus was snarling, barking, and hurling himself at the door.

“Rufus,” he commanded, snapping his fingers as Rufus reluctantly moved behind him, still growling and baring his teeth.

Ned slid back the bolt and opened the door to find two men on the step. One was clearly her brother. The gold hair and fine bone structure were unmistakable, yet on this man there was little to admire. Perhaps some women might find him handsome, but there was a cruel glint to his eyes, and his lips were thin and inclined to turn down. He held a crop in his hand. A few steps behind him stood another man, perhaps a coachman. He bore a fresh red stripe across his face that looked damned painful.

“What’s all this?” Ned said, having no difficulty in looking

belligerent, like a man disturbed in the middle of the night. “What the devil do you mean by hammering on my door at this hour?”

“Forgive me, sir,” said Mr Honeyfield, in a smooth, cultured accent. “It is a rather delicate matter. We believe my sister is lost out here, somewhere on your land, and I’m afraid that she may have come to harm.”

“Your *sister*?” Ned repeated, staring at him in disgust. “Out here? What kind of man allows his sister to get lost in the countryside on such a night?”

Mr Honeyfield gave a heavy sigh. “I have been asking myself the same question,” he said with a mournful shake of his head. “I foolishly entrusted her safety to my coachman here. She was being transported to an asylum, you see. I’m afraid she’s not of sound mind, a fact that is borne out by the fact she threw herself from a moving carriage. We did not discover her missing until the carriage arrived at its destination and my sister was not in it.”

He sent a look of quiet fury to the coachman, who shrank back another pace.

“Did she not have a maid with her?” Ned asked, not believing a bloody word of it. There was nothing that spoke of an unsound mind in the woman he’d seen, only terror. “Why was she alone, if ye were concerned for her mental state?”

“She can be violent,” Mr Honeyfield said, putting out his hands in a regretful gesture. “Sadly, she attacked her maid as they were about to leave, and the girl refused to come with her, fearing for her life.”

“I see,” Ned replied, believing he saw very well indeed, and the sooner Miss Honeyfield was out of this man’s power the better it would be. “Well, I’m sorry for your trouble, sir, but I’ve seen no one, though I’ll show ye around the barns if ye wish it. I’d not want some poor troubled girl freezing to death on my property.”

“I would, thank you, Mr…?”

“Hardy,” Ned replied, reaching for his coat and shrugging into it.

“If I might observe it, Mr Hardy, you are up late on such a night yourself?”

Ned saw a glint of suspicion in his eyes and shrugged. “It’s been a long day, and I drank more than I ought at dinner. I fell asleep by the fire and woke up hungry as a bear. I was just fixing myself something to eat before bed.”

It was a reasonable enough statement. Ned had done just that countless times since Sarah died, but he could still feel doubt

emanating from the man beside him. Ned took him and his henchman about the barns and outbuildings, taking his time and hoping they'd be frozen to the bone and eager for their beds the longer he kept them outside.

"Satisfied?" he asked, opening the door on the henhouse where the birds sent baleful glances at them, dozens of eyes shining like tiny ebony beads among the downy feathers, fluffed up like thistledown against the frigid night air.

Mr Honeyfield gave a heavy sigh and spread his hands in a gesture of defeat as Ned closed the door again. "I must keep looking. She's my sister after all, the poor disturbed creature. Might I ask you for one last favour before we leave you in peace, Mr Hardy? For it's a cruel night for man and beast."

"Ye can ask," Ned replied uneasily.

"A tot of something to warm us and a moment by your fire before we carry on our search, if you would be so good?"

His eyes were not as blue as his sister's, but a paler, colder version. They settled on Ned now, assessing and clearly suspicious.

"Certainly," Ned replied, keeping his voice easy. "I've a bottle of something that'll do the trick."

He led the way back to the house, forcing himself to appear unconcerned and praying that Miss Honeyfield had not moved from her hiding place.

"A nice little place you have here," Mr Honeyfield said, looking about as he walked into the kitchen, tramping dirty footprints across the clean floor.

Ned's heart hammered in his chest as his eyes raked about for any signs Miss Honeyfield had been there. "It suits me," he said, aware he was being patronised. He searched out the bottle of brandy and poured three stingy measures. The sooner these men were gone the better he'd like it. "To your sister finding safety," he said, raising his glass to the men.

"Indeed," Mr Honeyfield said with a tight smile.

Ned watched him as he downed his drink, and the man's eyes searched the room. He wasn't certain his sister had been here, but he wasn't certain she hadn't, either.

"Well, thank you for your hospitality, Mr Hardy," he said, placing the glass down and holding out his hand to Ned.

Ned forced himself to take it, to shake the hand that had left those ugly bruises on Miss Honeyfield's delicate skin. If this man ever came

back once he'd made her his wife, he'd show the fellow what it was like to be at the receiving end of a beating he wouldn't forget.

He was surprised at the rage he felt, at the fury seething beneath his skin. His temper had never troubled him. Even as a young man he'd never been hot-headed. As the biggest fellow for miles around, he'd been a magnet for trouble, for all those fools who wanted to tell the world they'd taken on Ned Hardy and felled him like an oak… except he'd rarely let them rouse him to anger. Violence solved nothing, and he knew the power of his own body, knew he could do too much damage if he indulged in temper and pride.

He'd been called a coward a time or two as a young man, until he'd been forced to stand and fight. They'd chosen the biggest, most evil fellow they could find for the job, ex-army he'd been, and a deal older than Ned. The man had been scarred, belligerent, and full of himself. Ned had knocked him out with a single blow and walked away. The poor bastard had been out cold for hours. No one had troubled him after that.

Ned saw Mr Honeyfield and his coachman out and then walked with them across the yard to the gate. He wanted to be sure they'd gone.

"Good evening to you, Mr Hardy," Mr Honeyfield said, raising a hand as he disappeared into the darkness.

"Good riddance to ye," Ned murmured under his breath, and strode back to the house.

Once inside, Ned bolted the door.

"Guard," he said to Rufus, who immediately sat, staring at the door as if it might fly open at any moment to reveal the hounds of hell.

Satisfied that the door was secure, Ned took the stairs two at a time and hurried to the bedroom. There was a little shriek as he opened the chest.

"It's all right, Miss Honeyfield," he said, feeling his chest constrict at the fear in her eyes. "Your brother is gone."

She sat up, staring at him in disbelief. "G-Gone?"

Ned reached down a hand and helped her to her feet. The desire to seek retribution only grew as she clung to his hand, looking at him as if he was her saviour.

"He's really gone?" she said again, her voice faint.

"He is," he said, smiling.

"Oh!"

She threw her arms about his neck, and all the breath left Ned's chest in a rush. Even through the shapeless garments that swamped her lovely form, he was aware of the soft press of her breasts against him, of the warmth of her, and of the subtle scent of roses. Heat grew within him, his entire body flaming to life in an instant, in a way he'd forgotten was even possible. His arms went about her without him even thinking about it, his hands at her tiny waist as he marvelled at how delicate she was.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll never be able to thank you enough."

Ned laughed a little at that. "Ye agreed to marry me, Miss Honeyfield. I reckon that's thanks enough."

She drew back then, her cheeks blazing, and Ned regretted having said anything that made her let go of him.

"I'm sorry," she said, staring at her toes and looking mortified. "I… I ought not have… I was just so relieved."

He frowned at her, surprised. "Are ye apologising for hugging me?" he said, unable to stop the way his mouth curved at the idea. "For, if so, I wish ye would not. I liked it fine."

"Oh," she said, letting out a little breath, and daring to glance up at him again.

She smiled then, a little shyly, and Ned wondered if he'd ever get used to the sight. It was like being hit in the head with a heavy, blunt object. He felt dazed by it, too stupid to think of anything but when she might let him kiss her. *Dumb ox*, he cursed himself. He'd just rescued her from her bloody brother; the last thing she'd want was him acting the fool.

She was marrying him because she had no choice, not because she wanted to. He'd do well to remember that fact. Yes, she was grateful for his help, but he'd not force his attentions on a woman who only suffered him out of gratitude. That would be worse than Sarah doing her duty.

No, thank you.

"Do you think he'll come back?" she asked.

Ned nodded. "Reckon he's suspicious. He'll have someone watch the house. We can't risk leaving for a while. I must carry on as usual, see what happens. If all's quiet next Friday, we'll go into town and be married at once. I'll buy a common licence to have ready, so there'll be no banns to read."

"Friday?" she said in dismay, her face falling. "That's a whole week away."

Ned wished it was because she was eager to marry him, but he wasn't a bloody fool, despite the desire to act like one in her presence. He felt like a boy, eager to please. He wanted to buy her presents and pick flowers for her… in the middle of bloody November. At this rate he'd be writing poetry by Wednesday.

Hell's bells, what was wrong with him?

"Aye, but we'd best be cautious. I can keep ye safe here, with Rufus to guard when I'm out on the farm. If we're set upon out in the open, though, and he brings men…."

He shrugged and then cursed himself as any trace of colour left her face, leaving her skin as white as moonlight.

"Ah, don't fret," he said, wishing he'd held his tongue. "You're safe. I won't let him have ye, my word on it, and once we're married, you'll be mine and no man can touch ye but me."

Her eyes widened, and he wished he'd just kept his bloody mouth shut and said her brother was gone for good.

"Not that I will!" he said in a rush. "I… I know that's not why… I mean, I know it's a marriage of… of convenience, like, so… so if you don't want me…."

To his horror, he felt heat creep up the back of his neck and stain his cheeks.

"I'll not touch ye," he said, forcing the words out though he wanted to bite out his tongue the minute he'd said them. What the bloody hell had he just said? She looked so frightened and vulnerable, and he wanted her to trust him even more than he wanted her in his bed. Far more. The trouble was that he wanted to bed her very badly indeed and, good God, he was an idiot.

"Oh," she said, blinking at him. "I see."

"So ye need not be… worried or… alarmed."

"No," she said.

"You're safe."

"Yes. Safe," she repeated.

"No one will bother ye. I won't… bother ye."

Oh God, Ned, stop talking you blithering idiot.

"I see." She nodded, not looking at him. "I see. Thank you." She frowned a little as she said that, as if she was unsure whether she ought to thank him.

"Right." Ned rubbed the back of his neck, which felt as if it was burning. "Well, this is your bedroom now, so… it's late. You'd best…

get some rest."

She nodded.

"There're nightgowns and the like in the chest there," he said, forcing himself not to think about her sliding between the sheets of his bed, and feeling a surge of possessiveness at the idea.

Get a grip, man.

"Thank you."

"Good night, then," he said, and almost ran for the door before he made a bigger mess than he already had.

"Wait!"

He halted as she spoke, her voice breathless and urgent. Ned turned to see her wringing her hands together.

"Where… where will you sleep?"

"The chair by the fire."

"Oh, but—" she said, looking appalled.

"Don't fret, lass. Sarah had me sleep there often enough. I'm used to it."

Resolutely, Ned stepped out of the room, and closed the door behind him.



Grace stared at the door, perplexed. She didn't understand this man. Not that she knew much about men. She'd had little experience of them outside of her father, her brother and, more recently, Mr Carrington.

Her brother had spent much of the past few days enjoying himself with tormenting her. He'd decided he'd best fill her in on the facts of life, and exactly what she ought to expect from her wedding night with Mr Carrington. He'd been vulgar, laughing at her embarrassment and shame. The things he'd said had appalled her when she'd thought of Mr Carrington touching her in such a way.

Yet she wasn't quite as innocent as her brother believed.

During the summer she'd escaped the house, literally. She was forbidden to wander, certainly not alone, but her father had taken to his bed, ill, and her brother wasn't at home. She'd walked for miles but still hadn't been ready to relinquish her freedom and return to the house, so she'd climbed into the hayloft above the stables. It smelled sweet and wholesome and she'd fallen asleep in the warm, dim space.

It had been late when she'd awoken, to strange sounds below her.

One of the grooms had a girl with him. Grace had been trapped, unable to escape. To her shame, she'd watched, knowing she ought not, but too fascinated to look away as the young man had coaxed the girl out of her clothes, not that she'd appeared unwilling. She'd watched as he touched and kissed and fondled the woman, so intimately it made Grace flush to even think of it. Yet the young woman had not been disgusted, shocked, or unhappy with her lover's attentions.

Far from it.

The soft sounds of her pleasure had rung in Grace's ears for days, making her wonder what it might be like to be touched so by a man, with such care and tenderness. What might it be like if Mr Hardy touched her so?

Heat flared in the pit of her belly. She remembered the moment she'd flung her arms about him, wondering now how she'd dared. He'd been so big and heavy and solid. When he'd put his hands about her waist, she'd wanted to press herself against him, to burrow into that strength and warmth, and the promise of safety. He smelled so good, too, like fresh air, leather, and straw, and something earthy, smoky and indefinably masculine that made her quiver inside.

But he would not touch her. He'd promised not to, but why? Was it her? Was there something wrong with her? Yet, he'd told her she was beautiful. Surely if he found her beautiful, he would desire her, would want to touch her in such a way?

Harold had told her men were animals and that Mr Carrington would use her as if she was nothing to him, like a dog. Mr Hardy was not like such men, men who would indeed use her, but would he deny himself just to make her feel safe?

Yes.

She'd known him a matter of hours, but every instinct told her that Ned Hardy was a good man to his core. He was solid and dependable, and he'd never use his strength against her. He reminded her of a towering English oak tree, proud and quiet in its solid dignity.

Grace smiled at that, and went to bed happy and hopeful for the first time she could remember.

Chapter 4

"Wherein our heroine dares to dream of the future."



Grace watched out of the window, wrapped in a blanket from the bed. Mr Hardy was busy in the yard, his breath blowing steamy clouds on the freezing air. The sun was coming up, a brighter patch glowing on the horizon against a grey-white sky.

She watched him haul bales of hay and trudge back and forth with buckets of water. He'd greeted the pigs and stopped to rub the huge sow's big belly, laughing as Rufus got jealous and demanded equal attention. He'd tugged at the dog's silky ears with affection and stroked his head, and Grace had smiled. Her brother would never have treated one of his dogs with such fondness. She watched as Mr Hardy carried on with his work, sending handfuls of corn scattering across the cobbles for the hens to fuss over before moving on to see to the horses.

If Harold didn't find her and ruin everything, this would be her life. Fear prickled beneath her skin as she realised how ill-equipped she was. Not only could she not cook anything but bread, she had no knowledge of how a farm ran. She barely knew one end of a sheep from the other, or a pig. Mr Hardy's late wife would have known; she'd have been raised for such a life and been a help to him, someone he could turn to. What use would Grace be?

Well, she would learn, and she'd do it quickly, too.

She knew most of her class would pity her for marrying a man so far beneath her, but Grace knew better. The only gentlemen she'd ever known hadn't been worthy of the name, and had only ever viewed her as a possession. If she'd been lucky, she'd have been dressed in finery and jewels, and paraded about until the time her husband got her with child. If she survived that, she could turn a blind eye as he took a mistress. Such was the life of a lady, as far as she could tell. It was the life her mother had lived until she'd died, when Grace was still a little girl.

If she found herself married to Mr Carrington, life would be a good deal worse. She closed her eyes against the memory of his hand on her wrists, holding them above her head as his free hand burrowed beneath her skirts. It had been instinctive to raise her knee, though it had been more luck than judgement that she'd found her mark.

Mr Carrington had made a strange sound and gone the oddest colour, but Grace hadn't waited to see what came next. She'd taken to her heels and run, hiding in the attics until Mr Carrington left and her brother had gone to bed before she'd come down again. The next morning, Harold had beaten her for her behaviour, though nowhere the bruises would show.

It had still been worth it. Anything was better than having that vile man's hands upon her.

With a sudden rush of guilt for having spent so much time watching Mr Hardy work and not lifting a finger herself, Grace hurried to wash and dress. She decided she must ask him for a needle and thread so she could alter the clothes he'd given her to fit. That was at least something with which she had some skill; she could mend for him, too. Altering these clothes would be a thrifty, wifely thing to do, would it not? Grace paused. Perhaps he'd not want that. He'd kept the clothes, after all, so perhaps they were precious to him. Had he been desperately in love with his wife? Did he keep her things close from sorrow? Did he mourn the loss of her still?

Grace's heart clenched, and she told herself it was pity for him that made her chest tight, though she knew better. What an ungrateful wretch she was, to have a man like this give her so much in such a short time, and yet still resent the fact that he might have loved his wife. Shame washed over her and she hurried down to the kitchen, determined to make amends and make herself useful.

The door opened just as she set foot in the kitchen, and Grace felt awkward as Mr Hardy came in. She froze as he set eyes on her. He stared for a moment, unmoving, and then let out a huff of laughter.

"I still can't believe you're real, lass," he said with a crooked grin, putting down the dirty boots he carried on an old cloth in the corner of the room, apparently set aside for the purpose. He shrugged out of his coat and hung it up, the scent of icy, winter air reaching her as he moved. "I keep thinking I'll wake up and you'll be gone."

"Wishful thinking, I'm afraid," Grace said, trying to make him laugh, but his face fell, and he frowned, his dark eyes serious.

"Don't say that. It's far from true. You're the best Christmas present I ever had in my whole life. Certainly the prettiest," he added, flashing that grin again as Grace noted a dimple in his cheek.

Her chest tightened, the air caught and held in her lungs as pleasure filled her chest. How easily he said such lovely things.

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," she said, aware she sounded breathless. She *was* breathless. That dimple had been

disarming in the most devastating way.

He stared at her and shook his head, consternation in his eyes. “If that ain’t the most tragic thing I ever heard, I don’t know what is.”

She watched as he scratched his head, setting this thick, dark hair all in disorder. It was a touch too long and Grace had the sudden urge to reach out and smooth it back down again.

“Hungry?” he asked, looking relieved as Grace nodded. “Right. Breakfast, then. Sit yourself down.”

“Oh, but… I….” He paused as she protested, and Grace flushed. “Isn’t that a wife’s job, to… to make breakfast for her husband?”

She watched, fascinated, as two spots of colour burned high on his tanned face.

“Aye,” he said, his voice low and gruff. “Reckon it is, though you’ll have Mrs Tucknott most days, and we can get a maid, too. Not much point with just me here, but you’ll need one, I know. I’ll not work you to the bone, lass.”

“I want to help, though,” Grace objected. “And I would like to cook… for you.”

Pleasure warmed his eyes, and Grace didn’t bother to fight the quiver of anticipation inside her at the sight.

“D’ye know how?” he asked, his voice soft as he knew the answer as well as she did. It was his innate kindness that framed the question gently, not wanting to embarrass her.

Grace bit her lip, humiliated as she reminded herself what a bad bargain the man had made in rescuing her. She hadn’t the first idea how to be a farmer’s wife. “N-No,” she stammered, praying he’d not change his mind about marrying her when he realised how useless she was. “But I should like to learn. I *must* learn. Please.”

“Right ye are, then,” he said. “Fetch the last of the bread from the pantry. We’ll be needing some fresh when that’s gone.”

“Oh, I can do that,” Grace said with a rush of satisfaction at being able to do something useful. She hurried off to fetch the bread.

“Bring that dish of eggs, too,” he called.

The next half-hour was spent companionably as he instructed Grace on the art of frying bacon and eggs, and then frying slices of bread in the bacon fat. One half of the bread was darker and crispier than the other, as she’d cut the slices and made a mess of it. One half was as thick as a doorstep, the other wafer thin.

The kitchen was filled with delicious scents and by the time their plates were full, and the table set ready for them, Grace’s stomach was

growling with anticipation.

"Ye did a grand job," he said, smiling his approval at his full plate.

"Oh, but the bread is all lopsided, and I broke your eggs," Grace said with a frown as she reached for her knife and fork.

"I like them that way," Mr Hardy said, shrugging.

Grace watched as he cut a thick bit of bacon, then a piece of the fried bread, speared both with his fork, and dipped it in the egg. He closed his eyes as he sighed with pleasure and Grace experienced a rush of something hot and liquid low in her belly at the sound, and sat riveted by the sight of his throat working as he swallowed.

He opened his eyes to discover her staring at him, open-mouthed. Flushing hard, Grace averted her eyes and returned her attention to her breakfast.

They ate in silence for a while as Grace did her best to keep her gaze from returning to his. She'd never been so aware of another person in this way before, as though her body were in some way linked to the man beside her by invisible strings. To her, they thrummed with tension, every movement triggering a response inside her. It was exciting, invigorating, and a little daunting, and she wondered at her boldness in wanting him to feel the same. Grace licked the bacon grease from her lips and dared another glance at him, only to find he was gazing at her this time, his eyes fixed on her mouth. Her heart skittered in her chest. He cleared his throat and looked hastily away.

"There's a cookery book in the pantry. I bought it for my wife, years back, but she preferred plain fare and never took to it. Mrs Tucknott has used it, though, and made some fine dishes. If ye were wanting to learn such things, ye are welcome to use it."

"Oh, yes," Grace said eagerly, grasping at the opportunity to bring something useful to this marriage. "I should like very much to learn. I want to be a help to you about the farm, so I beg that you will instruct me in all the things I must know. I'm sure I could help with the animals in the morning, too."

Mr Hardy frowned, his expression troubled. "That's not necessary," he said, shaking his head. "I can see to the beasts, there's no need to stir yourself so early. You'll not be used to it."

"No," Grace allowed, her voice hesitant as she sensed his unease. "But if this is to be my life, I should learn. Did your first wife help you in such a way?"

"Aye, of course, but Sarah was born to such a life. You're a lady, and—"

“Mr Hardy,” Grace said, surprised by the force of her own voice, “you are taking on a wife you neither wanted nor expected. I’m aware of what you sacrifice to do so, that perhaps you had plans to… to court someone.” Grace pushed down the troubling sensation that rose in her chest at that and ploughed on. “I’m bringing nothing but trouble to you, but I’ll not compound that trouble by sitting back and watching you work twice as hard to support a wife who is of no earthly use to you.”

She ground to a halt as she realised he was staring at her, quite obviously bewildered.

“Not want ye?” he said, and she became aware of the quality of his voice, somewhere between outrage and astonishment. “Where in blazes did ye get that hare-brained idea from? ’Cause it weren’t from me.”

There was amusement in the words and, as delighted as Grace was to hear him say such things, she felt a flash of indignation at the falsehood.

“Yes, it was,” she shot back.

His dark eyebrows rose, and he set down his knife and fork. “Lass, I’ve known ye less than twenty-four hours, though I admit that’s hard to credit with all that’s gone on, but I know dam—very well that I’ve never said I don’t want to wed ye.”

“N-No,” Grace said, wishing now she’d never started this conversation, as she’d be forced to explain herself. “But you… you did imply that… that you didn’t….”

Her courage deserted her, and she stared down at her plate.

“Didn’t what?”

Grace took a deep breath, her cheeks hotter than the pan in which they’d fried the bacon. “Didn’t… desire me.”

There was such an absolute silence that she simply had to raise her head and dare to meet his eyes.

He looked dumbstruck. After a time, he collected himself and closed his mouth, which had been hanging open. Grace watched as he rubbed a hand over his face and got to his feet. He paced to the fire, stared at it, and paced back. She looked up at him as he stared down at her, watched him take a breath to speak, stop, rub the back of his neck.

Finally, he cleared his throat and sat down.

“Miss Honeyfield.”

“Grace,” she corrected. “We’re betrothed, after all.”

He smiled at that, his dark eyes warm. “Grace,” he said, and the sound of her name, spoken with that rich country burr, did something to her. It was so tender. Her heart thudded, her skin so alive that she was aware of everything, from the warmth of the fire at her back and the garters tied about her thighs, to the too big clothes bunched at her waist, the fabric rasping against flesh that seemed suddenly oversensitive.

“Grace,” he said again, as her chest rose and fell at the intimacy of the moment. “Did ye have no looking glass where ye came from?”

“Of course,” she said, perplexed, and more so when his eyes darkened.

“Then, do ye not understand the effect ye have on a man?”

Her pleasure at his words faded almost at once as she remembered Mr Carrington and the way he’d told her she was a tease, that she’d been flaunting herself to him, that she’d been asking for him to lay hands on her when she’d done nothing but try to avoid him at all costs.

“Nay, lass.”

She jolted as Mr Hardy moved from his chair and went to his knees before her, taking her hand in his.

“Don’t look like that. It wasn’t an accusation. I know well that some men are pitiful creatures governed by lust and selfishness. Ye cannot help your beauty any more than the birds can help flying. Both are wondrous things and I shall never tire of looking upon ye, but ye cannot think I don’t desire ye, surely?”

Grace swallowed, considering the question. Last night she’d believed he’d only been trying to reassure her with his words about never touching her as a husband touched a wife. Surely he didn’t mean for her to be nothing more than a pretty ornament, with no use or part in his life? She knew he was troubled by the idea he was below her, but last night she’d believed that was something she could easily overcome.

That belief had wobbled this morning in the light of a new day. When she’d considered his wife and how inexperienced and ill-suited she was to replace her, she’d felt uncertain of her ability to take Sarah’s place, to make him happy, even to bring him pleasure, but she could not question the look in his eyes now.

“I did doubt it,” she said. “When… you said you’d not touch me.”

His eyebrows rose, a slight smile tugging at the corner of his mouth and giving a tantalising glimpse of that adorable dimple. “I’m a damned fool for saying that, and I wanted to cut out my tongue the

moment I'd said it. I only meant for you to be comfortable, to feel safe. To understand that I'd not touch ye before ye felt ready for it, and never if ye didn't welcome me. I never said I didn't *want* to."

"Oh," she said, with a deep sigh of relief, and then the blush which had faded returned with a vengeance as she realised how telling that sigh had been.

"I cannot wait to wed ye, Grace," he said now, the low growl of his voice making awareness of him thrum under her skin. "But we have a week to get to know each other and, if ye should change ye mind, I'd… I'd understand."

"No!" she exclaimed, alarmed by the idea. "I shan't change my mind."

He smiled then, and the dimple was a sweet little divot in his rugged features. It tempted her, inviting her to make assumptions about his nature, about a playful side to his character she'd not yet seen but suspected was there.

"What?" he asked, a curious look in his eyes, as Grace realised her attention had been captivated.

She released a breath of laughter, gesturing to his face. "You… you have a dimple."

"I do not," he retorted, looking rather disgusted by the idea.

"You do," she insisted and then found herself chuckling as she added. "When you smile it's quite visible. Only one, mind. Don't you have a looking glass, Mr Hardy?"

He snorted, aware she was teasing him. "Aye, but I don't go around smirking at myself when I'm shaving." He rubbed a hand over his face, as though he could seek the thing out and remove it. "Where?" he demanded.

Grace watched that strong hand move over his face and remembered the warmth of it wrapped about her fingers, the feel of it at her waist. "Just here," she said, daring to raise her hand to his face. She held her breath as she touched a fingertip to his cheek, in the place where that distracting little dimple had appeared.

"Are ye sure?" he asked, his eyes darker still as he gazed up at her and she felt he was asking her something else, quite different.

"Very sure," she said breathlessly.

He raised his hand and slid it over hers. Her skin burned where he touched her, conscious of every callus, of the rough texture of a working man's hands on her. He lifted her hand and turned it palm side up, and she watched, her heart thudding loudly in her ears as he

pressed his mouth to the tender flesh.

Grace drew in a sharp breath as his lips met her skin, part shock, part delight as sensation shot through her. It was as though his mouth had tugged at something within her, something connected to a private part of her that blazed to life and clamoured for more of his touch, his kisses.

He was breathing hard too, she realised, and she recognised the effort it took for him to release her hand and move away from her.

“Eat up,” he said, avoiding her eyes. “Be a pity to let yer breakfast go cold when ye worked so hard to make it.”

Grace did as he told her, finding herself ravenously hungry, and discovering that the hearty breakfast, good as it was, did not entirely satisfy the need.

Chapter 5

"Wherein two lonely souls find each other."



Once the most pressing jobs were done, Ned took himself off to Lewes and handed over what seemed a great deal of money as security on a common licence to the Archdeacon. He didn't like leaving Grace or the farm for the best part of the day, but if they were to marry without the banns being read, there was no other option.

He'd left Rufus on guard and made Grace bolt the doors behind him. It was unlikely Rufus would let anyone within a mile of the house, but if someone was ruthless enough to kidnap a woman, a dog would not stand in his way. Ned had left Grace instructions to keep away from the windows, and to hide if anyone came prowling about, but he still spent the four hours it took him to get to Lewes, do his business and get back, looking over his shoulder and fretting himself to death.

Once he'd returned, the licence tucked securely in his pocket, he saw to the horses and hurried back to the house. Never in his life had he been more impatient to get out of the cold and return home. Though their relationship had been perfunctory, once Sarah had gone, the house had felt bigger and emptier than Ned could have imagined. They might not have been lovers, or even really friends, but they'd discussed the day's work, the beasts, and what crops had done well and those they were disappointed in. Since she'd died, loneliness had eaten at him, gnawing at his bones and making him feel hollow and weary, making every job that needed doing seem a trial to be endured.

He'd been fortunate enough to have found other work for the men he employed for the weeks before Christmas. Work was scarce, especially since the last blast furnace had closed at Ashburnham. Many of the men in these parts had been in iron production until the Midlands and the North had discovered a cheaper method using coke. Too many men had lost their livelihoods, and he'd have not turned his own workmen away if they'd had no other means to support themselves. As it was, he'd take them back on after Christmas, when that hardest of festivals had passed. It was a time for gathering your family about you, and Ned knew what he risked by giving himself time to think, to dwell on the bleak landscape of his life.

This was when loneliness bit hardest, when a bottle of strong

spirits could feel like an old friend, beckoning oblivion. Ned would not allow himself such weakness, so he'd found other work for his men and decided the winter jobs would be his alone. He set himself a bone breaking schedule and kept his hands and mind busy. Mending fences over acres and acres of land was hard work and would send him home weary, weary enough to sleep without thinking and regretting.

Now he was reborn. Since Grace had arrived, he flew about the farm, working like a man possessed, with a vigour he'd not felt in a decade, and all for her. Every second of the day he was desperate to return to her, to be in her company again.

Her beauty still astonished him. It was like having some fine piece of art that ought to be in a museum given into his care. Except she was no artwork. She wasn't cold and untouchable. No. Grace was warm and soft and, when she smiled at him, he felt like a king. She blushed often and easily, and he constantly reminded himself she was an innocent. Being raised on a farm and surrounded by boys and girls of the same ilk, Ned found it hard to credit how sheltered she'd been. No, not sheltered, but caged, shut away from the world. She'd no friends to speak of and had known little of life outside of her home, certainly not of men… until the past months, at least. Rage simmered inside him for everything she'd suffered at the hands of her father and brother. The desire to make others suffer for her pain was so visceral he could taste it.

He'd coaxed a little more of her history from her today. Her father had been an unpleasant, unloving man who guarded his daughter jealously. He'd forbidden her to mix with others, forbidden her to make her come out, preferring to keep her possessively at home. He'd had a cruel tongue and would lock her in her room if she disobeyed him. Occasionally he'd slap or shake her, but that seemed to be the extent of the physical violence she'd endured. Oh, it was enough to make Ned wish the man wasn't dead so he could kill him himself, but compared to her brother….

Her brother.

Mr Harold Honeyfield.

Bastard.

The man would never know how much it took to rouse Ned to anger, but soon enough Honeyfield would know just how bloody angry he was. Ned had a score to settle there, and he was itching to do it, as soon as Grace was his wife and safe from her brother. As if selling his only sister to a monster wasn't wicked enough, tormenting her with vulgar descriptions of what the life he'd arranged for her would hold….

Ned tamped the fury down, pushed the tempting image of his hands wrapped about Harold's throat from his mind and forced himself not to run back to the farm. A fast walk was acceptable. He might feel like a lad with his first girl waiting for him with the promise of a kiss, but he was damned if he'd look too much like one.

Rufus scrambled to his feet, wagging his tail as Ned reached the door.

"Good lad," Ned said, giving the dog some fuss for having guarded Grace so faithfully.

He kicked the mud from his boots and unlaced them with impatient fingers before hurrying into the house. As he entered the kitchen he was spellbound in a moment, just as he'd known he would be. The sight of her forced the air from his lungs like a punch to the gut as he took in the scene before him.

Grace was bent over the cookery book, her white teeth worrying her full lower lip in a way that made him want to kiss the poor, tormented flesh better. Her hair had fallen loose, several blonde locks escaping her pins, and there was a smudge of flour on her cheek.

Tenderness welled inside him as he saw the concentration she devoted to her task, so absolute that she'd not heard him enter. He remembered her pride and delight at midday as she'd presented him with two freshly baked loaves of bread, and the way she'd flushed with pleasure as he'd praised her efforts. She was so determined to learn how to please him, how to care for him.

His mouth grew dry as he wondered if that determination might be present in other, more intimate areas of their life. Desire rose like a tide, and then he was that green boy after all. God, he was so desperate for her he'd likely spend in his britches if she so much as touched his hand.

He watched as she peered into the saucepan she'd retrieved from the stove and then took a spoon, dipping it into the contents. His brain ground to a halt and other parts of him surged to life as her lips parted and she blew gently on the spoon. She tasted whatever it was, her nose wrinkling a little as her delicate tongue darted out and licked her lips.

That was all it took. His mind was ringing a bell and calling for last orders as his brain shut down, shut up shop and turned control over to his cock which was paying complete attention.

No. No. Behave. Ye have not wed the lass yet, Edward, my lad. Ye will treat her with respect, like she deserves to be treated.

Ned sucked in a breath as Grace looked up. It left his lungs again

all in a rush at the smile that dawned on her face at the sight of him.

"Mr Hardy!" she exclaimed with such obvious pleasure that it was all Ned could do not to cross the distance between them, haul her into his arms, and show her just how pleased he was to see her too.

"Ned," he said, though it sounded more like a croak than his name. "Call me, Ned, eh?"

Her smile widened. "Ned," she repeated, as though she was trying it on for size.

He couldn't breathe.

"I've cooked dinner," she said, gesturing to the pot and then frowning down into it. "I'm not sure it's very good, mind," she added, wrinkling her nose again, the expression so endearing Ned longed to kiss her nose and smooth the tiny furrows away.

"Can't wait," he said, not daring to take his coat off in case she noticed his… er… affliction. Christ, he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so out of control. It had been so long since he'd felt desire at all that it was hard to credit how overwhelming it was. He was as hard as the frozen ground outside, and he needed to get away from her and deal with it before he frightened her half to death.

Try as he might, however, he couldn't stop staring at her and remembering the moment this morning when she'd all but admitted to wanting him. Her quiet intake of breath as he'd kissed her palm would have sent him to his knees if he'd not already been there. Moving away from her and finishing breakfast had been the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life and he still couldn't fathom how he'd managed it.

He could only marvel at the capriciousness of fate, such a fate that could allow him to get caught by the oldest trick in the book to a woman who didn't care a fig for him, only to take her from him long before her time. That the same fate would then drop a damned goddess in his lap made his head spin.

"Are you all right?" she said, turning to study him now. "You look a little flushed. Oh," she said, hurrying towards him. "You've not caught a chill, have you?"

Ned might have laughed if he'd not been so desperate.

"No. No chill," he managed, moving away before she could offer to help him out of his coat. Good Christ, he was burning up. "Better go and wash up," he rasped, heading for the stairs. "Don't want to spoil dinner."

He ran up the stairs and shut the bedroom door, only to discover she was still all around him. She'd lit a candle for him and left hot

water in the jug for him to wash. The fire was lit too, and the room was warm and cosy in the glow of candle and firelight. Her scent lingered, the sweet trace of roses, and the nightdress she'd worn last night was folded neatly on the pillow.

Feeling like a fool but quite unable to stop himself, he moved to the bed and reached for it, lifting it to his nose and breathing deeply. He ought to feel guilty perhaps, for seeking the scent of another woman on his dead wife's nightgown, but he couldn't summon it. He'd done his best by Sarah and, after the initial shock of her betrayal, he'd never used it against her. They might have been happier if she'd let him in, if she'd tried to love him, but she'd only ever loved the farm, the land, and the security that came with Ned's name. He'd given her all she'd allow, and he'd not grieve for a woman who'd not wanted him to love her.

The delicate scent of another woman's skin rose up and enveloped his senses as he held the nightgown to his face. Ned groaned, imagining that scent upon her body, imagining his mouth upon her skin. In his mind's eye he took the clothes from her slender frame, the too–big, ill-fitting garments that Sarah had worn. He hated to see those clothes on her. She ought to be dressed in silks and velvet and lace, everything that was fine and beautiful and befitting of a lady.

He didn't imagine those clothes, though. He imagined skin, warm and silky and lush, imagined his hands on her and the sound of her pleasure at his touch. Might she sound like that? Might she welcome him into her body and take pleasure in him as he knew he could with her? She'd welcomed his touch so far, shyly perhaps, but that was to be expected. If he was patient and gentle, might she come to want him, perhaps even to love him? The idea stole his breath and his heart, and he fumbled with the buttons on his trousers until he could take himself in hand and relieve his body's torment, for the moment at least.

He was so overwrought that it took little more than seconds, and he smothered the desperate sounds as he came hard into his own hand, the release barely dulling his hunger, which rose from years of aching loneliness and a life filled with less love and affection than he would bestow upon a dog.

Unsettled and on edge still, shameful of having such lewd thoughts of a woman who was not yet his wife, Ned washed and changed into clean clothes, forcing himself to appear calm before he headed back down the stairs.

The moment she looked around and smiled at him, any measure of calm he'd attained fled. He ached to touch her, even just to hold her

hand, to kiss her palm as he had that morning, the warmth of her skin still burning against his lips like a brand.

"Please, sit down," she said.

Ned moved towards her and pulled out a chair for her to sit down, his awareness of her absolute as he moved to take his place at the head of the table.

"I made soup," she said, anxiety flickering in her blue eyes. "I thought that might not be too hard. It's from a recipe in that book."

She ladled a generous serving into a bowl and Ned sat, riveted to the sight of her slender fingers curved about the ladle. Everything male about him twitched. He swallowed.

Grace set the bowl before him. She looked rather as if she was awaiting a death sentence. Ned smiled.

"It smells good," he said, taking up his own spoon and determined to eat with gusto even if it ought to be fed to the pigs. He tucked in and found—a little to his surprise—that it was delicious. "That is a very fine soup," he said, feeling the strangest ache in his chest as he saw happiness bloom in her eyes.

"Is it? Truly? You're not just being kind?"

"God's honest truth, love," he said, intrigued by the flush of colour that stained her beautiful face. He wondered if he would ever learn to breathe in her presence. Heart thudding, he dipped the spoon into the soup and held it out to her. "Here, try yourself if ye don't believe me."

Grace stared at him, and for a moment he thought she'd refuse, but then she leaned towards him as he moved the spoon to her mouth. Ned could not take his eyes from her lips, waiting for the moment her tongue swept out and licked them. They were full and pink and the longing to taste them was a sharp ache in his heart. The rest of his body was just as badly afflicted, and he wondered if he'd ever be able to leave the table.

"It *is* quite good," she said, glancing up at him. "Isn't it?"

"More than good," he replied, forcing himself to carry on eating.

She served herself a bowlful, and they ate in silence until Grace got up to clear the table. Ned stayed her, demanding another bowl of soup and basking in the delight in her eyes as she served him.

"I can't take much credit for the pie," she said, bustling about the kitchen as Ned watched her with a dreamlike sense of unreality. "Your Mrs Tucknott left it in the pantry. I did the vegetables, though."

The vegetables were less successful, the potatoes rather raw, and the cabbage boiled to a mush, but Ned ate everything and asked for

more, praising her efforts. He'd have eaten pigswill happily if it would have kept her with him, kept that smile in her eyes when she looked at him.

Grace laughed, and the sound lifted his heart in a way he'd forgotten was possible. Was this what happiness felt like? He'd lived so long without it, he wasn't sure he'd recognise it. Whatever it was felt foreign and yet so natural in her presence, and even more precious and wonderful for its rarity.

"I think you are flattering me, Mr Hardy," she said with a sigh. "Mrs Tucknott's pie was excellent, and I did creditably with the soup, but the vegetables…."

She pulled a face and Ned laughed too, a sound he hardly knew, it had been so long. He felt emotion rise inside him, pushing at his ribs, such joy in this moment he didn't know how his chest could contain it.

"I think ye are marvellous," he said, meaning it, enchanted by the pleasure his words brought to her face.

"Do you?" she asked.

Ned nodded, daring to reach out and touch her hand. "So soft," he marvelled, stroking over her skin with a fingertip.

He heard her gasp and looked up, wondering if he ought not touch her, but she was smiling at him. Ned took her hand in his and she didn't look away from him, the smile didn't falter. They sat that way for a moment, not speaking until Ned got up the courage to raise her hand to his lips. He kissed each finger, his heart hammering as desire held his breath captive. Lowering her hand again, he released his hold so she could draw back if she wanted, but she only slid her fingers from his grasp, and raised them to his face.

Ned held his breath, closed his eyes as her palm cupped his cheek, her thumb stroking his skin. Thank goodness he'd troubled to shave before he came down, hating the thought of his coarse beard abrading her delicate skin. Oh God, he would die or disgrace himself if she kept touching him like this. Unable to resist, he covered her hand with his and turned his face into it. He kissed her palm as he had earlier, kissed the heel of her hand, and her wrist, where the pulse beat like butterfly wings against his lips.

He forced himself to look at her, praying his kisses had not offended her. She was breathing hard, the rapid rise and fall of her chest obvious even beneath the shapeless garment that so disguised her feminine curves. Her mouth was a little open, her blue eyes dark, and Ned felt the jolt of recognition burn a path to his cock as he saw

the echo of his own desire.

"Grace," he said, his voice low. "Grace, I know I ought not ask it but… Oh, God, love, I'm desperate to kiss ye."

"Y-You are?"

He gave a strangled laugh at the question. "I am. Do you mind?"

She stared at him for a moment and then licked her lips. It was all he could do not to groan at the sight.

"No," she said, her voice sure. "No, I don't mind."

"Come here," he said, pushing his chair away from the table and tugging at her hand.

She got up, moving to stand in front of him, unsure of what to do.

Ned smiled and gave another gentle tug. "Please, love."

Her eyes widened as she realised his intention, but she didn't object, and she perched precariously on his knees. Ned reached out and touched her cheek, still astonished by the satin texture of it. She closed her eyes as he caressed her, smoothing the sleek line of an eyebrow, tracing his fingers over her cheekbone, over her jaw.

"I never saw anything so lovely in my whole life," he said. "Will ye really wed me, lass? It doesn't seem possible."

A smile curved over her mouth. "I think I'd better," she said.

Ned let his hand fall away. "Is that the only reason?" he asked, knowing it was ridiculous for him to feel such anguish at the idea. "Because you're ruined now, because you've no other option?"

What a fool he was. He'd known she was desperate, that she was marrying him because she had no option, what the devil was he doing asking her such a thing?

"No," she said, the answer dragging his heart out of the dark hole it had tumbled in and sending it soaring into the light. "No, it's not the only reason."

He laughed a little, incredulous but relieved, and she smiled, reaching up to trace a finger over his mouth.

"I think I should like to marry you, no matter the circumstances."

The breath left him in a rush. "Gracie," he said, his arms going about her and pulling her closer. "Oh, love, you've no idea how ye make me feel."

"I-I think perhaps I do," she said, laughing a little and laying her head on his shoulder.

He held her close, stroking her hair and thinking this was as close

to heaven as he'd ever been in his life.

"May I kiss ye, Grace? I know we are not yet wed, and I promise not to take liberties, but… I can't think of anything else."

"Yes," she said, the word breathed more than spoken, the warmth of it fluttering against his neck and sending anticipation through him like a lightning strike. "Yes, please, Ned."

Chapter 6

"Wherein the first taste of temptation."



Grace wondered if her heart could keep beating at the frantic pace it had found, and then Mr Hardy—*Ned*—asked if he could kiss her. The poor thing was out of control now, racing so fast she felt giddy with it, dizzy with his nearness.

She'd known he was a big man, large and powerful, but now, sitting on his lap with his arms around her, she was surrounded by virile male. He was so warm and so alive and he overwhelmed her senses. If she'd been bold enough, she would have wrapped her arms about him and burrowed into that solid masculinity, pressing her slighter, more delicate frame against him. She wanted to feel him, the weight of him, the strength of him, but she did not know how to ask for such things and so she waited, trembling with anticipation.

"You're not afraid of me?" he asked, concerned.

As close as they were, she could see flecks of gold, bronze, and green in his brown eyes, and such warmth, such care shone there.

"No, not in the least afraid," she said, meaning it.

He smiled, and she sighed as his warm palm cupped her face. Oh, how she loved the feel of his hands on her, so gentle, so reverent.

"Have ye ever been kissed?" he asked, something in his voice that caught her attention.

She went to tell him no and then paused, realising she couldn't. Though could such an assault be called a kiss? Grace stiffened in his arms.

"I'm sorry," he said, immediately contrite, though for what she wasn't certain. "I ought not to have asked, it's none of my business."

"No, it's not that," she said, cross with herself for allowing Mr Carrington to spoil this perfect moment. "There's been no one. It's… it's only… last week. Last week…."

Her voice cracked as she remembered.

"Oh, God," he said, understanding at once, both hands framing her face now. "Gracie, love, what did he do?"

She shook her head, not wanting to talk about it. Ned held her to him, tucking her head under his chin as he rubbed circles on her back, soothing her like a child.

“Tell me, love,” he said, his voice achingly tender. “Tell me what happened. You’ll feel better once you’ve said it aloud, and ye surely know I’ll not blame ye for anything that bastard did.”

Grace swallowed. “It was nothing much, really. I… I was just so frightened. He’s vile, and I couldn’t stand it when he touched me.”

She was aware of the tension singing through his body and thought she’d best tell him it all before he imagined the worst.

“Mr Carrington came to ask me to marry him and when I refused he was furious. He… he pinned me against the wall and said awful things. He said I’d led him on and that it didn’t matter whether or not I wanted him, I would marry him. He’d bought me from Harold, and so I… I belonged to him.”

Ned let out a curse under his breath and Grace put her arms about his neck, feeling the strange need to comfort him for the distress she knew she was causing him in telling him this.

“He kissed me, though it didn’t feel like a kiss. It… it hurt, his teeth biting at my lips and he forced his tongue….” She paused for a moment and took a deep breath. “He had my wrists pinned above my head with one hand and he was so strong I knew I had to fight. He started to pull up my skirts, and I—”

“I’ll kill him,” Ned growled, such savagery in the words that Grace knew he meant it.

“N-No, no you must not. You cannot,” she said, panicked now, pushing away from his chest to sit back and look at him. “I won’t see you hurt on my behalf. He’s a powerful man, Ned, and besides, what will become of me if you are prosecuted? No. In any case, there is no need. I already punished him for his attentions.”

He stilled at that. “You did?”

Grace nodded. “I was struggling to get away and… and it was instinct really, but I raised my knee, hard, and he… he sort of crumpled.”

Ned stared at her and then let out a breath before hugging her to him again. “Clever girl,” he said, with such obvious pride that she felt her heart swell. “Clever, brave girl, Gracie. Oh, God, love. When I think of the bastard’s hands on ye…. He deserves more than a knee to the bollocks. He deserves to be castrated.”

She gave a shocked little bark of laughter and Ned smiled at her.

“That wasn’t a kiss, Grace, not even close. It was an attack. It doesn’t count and ye must not think on it anymore. Carrington will never trouble ye again. I’ll see to that. If he does, I’ll make him regret

it. He's a vile bully but he's no fool. He'll not pursue ye once we are wed. Not in person, at least. Your brother I don't trust an inch, but he's easily dealt with. Carrington, though?" He shook his head. "The scandal would not reflect well on such a man, for one thing. He's vain—a bloody peacock. To be seen to be chasing an unwilling woman would hurt his pride."

"You think so?" she asked.

"I do. Though if I'm wrong, ye may rest assured I'll break his fine neck."

"No, Ned," she said, panicked, but he pressed a finger to her lips.

"Hush."

He withdrew his finger, sliding his hand into her hair, his palm warm and rough against her cheek.

"Yes," she said, before he could even ask the question.

She held her breath as he leaned in, the touch of his lips against hers so gentle, and she sighed against his mouth. It wasn't one kiss, but a thousand kisses, each one melting into the next as his lips caressed hers. He drew back, breaking the connection, and disappointment slammed through her.

"No! Don't stop," she protested before she could think about it, and blushing like fury as he smiled, a victorious smile of such pure satisfaction that it made her insides tremble in response.

"I wasn't going to," he said, kissing her again. "Open for me," he coaxed, and she shivered as his tongue traced the seam of her mouth. "Let me in."

She did, still a little surprised that it wasn't wet and revolting as it had been with Mr Carrington.

His tongue was warm and silky, inviting her to touch him in the same way and she did, quickly enthralled by the sweet tangle and parry of one against the other. It was delicious, intoxicating, heat pooling inside her, low and deep, an ache between her thighs that made her squirm on his lap as she remembered the groom and his lady. He groaned, the sound sending a thrill of excitement thrumming down her spine. Would Ned touch her like that? Was that what he thought of now? She burned, hot and needy and desperate for more and almost wept with frustration when he pulled back.

"We'd better stop," he said, the words gruff, his eyes so dark they seemed almost black now, reflecting the glow of the lamplight like polished ebony.

"No," she said, daring to sink her hands into his hair. "Not yet."

She tugged his head back down, and he went without a murmur, but this time there was an urgency to his kiss. His mouth was demanding, devouring her like he was ravenous. Far from being alarmed, or remembering Mr Carrington's revolting attentions, Grace burned hotter still. She wanted Ned's hands on her, those big, rough hands on her skin, touching her, caressing her. They were at her waist, and she felt the urgent desire to make them move higher. She whimpered with desire and he stopped at once, and would have put her away from him if she'd not clung to his neck.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking so appalled she almost laughed. "Did I hurt ye? Frighten—"

"No," she said at once, smiling up at him in a daze of euphoria. "Nothing like that. It was… lovely."

The look in his eyes stole what little breath remained in her lungs and she gasped as he clutched her to him, burying his face in her neck and breathing deeply.

"Gracie," he said, her name like a prayer of thanks to a generous deity. "Oh, Gracie, do ye have the slightest idea what ye do to me? I've thought of nothing but ye since the moment ye fell into my arms. I swear I'll think of nothing else for the rest of my days."

"You'll not get much done like that," she teased, more delighted than she could say by his words. She felt beautiful and powerful, things she'd never felt in all her life.

He laughed and her heart soared that she'd made him happy. She'd never done that before, either. No one had ever smiled when she entered a room, never laughed at her words, not with amusement at least.

"Reckon not," he said with a sigh. "But I think ye had best go to bed, lass, before I forget myself."

"I don't want to go to bed," she protested. "And there are the dinner things to wash up."

"I'll do them," he said at once. "God knows I'll not sleep."

"Why not?" she asked, having a good idea but still wanting to hear him say it.

"Because I want ye badly," he said, the words raw and honest. "But I'll not have ye walk down the aisle anything less than ye ought to be. I won't have ye feel any regret for being with me, no more than is natural at such a marriage, in any case."

She frowned at that. "I regret nothing that has happened between us, and I will not regret marrying you. Whatever circumstances

brought us together."

He kissed her again for that and she sank into him, her hands flat against his chest, revelling in the heavy muscle under his shirt, wanting to get closer, to put her hands on his skin, but he stood and let her go, so fast that she swayed and he was forced to take hold of her again.

"Ah, love, don't tempt me any harder, I beg ye."

She flushed, remembering Mr Carrington's words and went to turn away, mortified, but he stopped her, catching her hand in his.

"No… no, I didn't mean…. Ye did nothing wrong, nothing at all. Only, I want our wedding night to be perfect, and it's damned hard to stop touching ye. I love that ye want me to, Grace. I need that honesty from ye and ye won't understand what it means to me, how it makes me feel, but away to bed with ye now, for both our sanity. *Please*."

Grace nodded and went to walk away, but he didn't let go of her hand. She paused.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. "Goodnight, my beauty. I'll dream of ye."

Any lingering anxiety fled in the face of such sweetness and she smiled at him.

"Goodnight, Ned."

The next morning, Grace awoke to discover Ned was already hard at work in the yard below. Frustrated at not waking when he did, she jumped out of bed and washed as fast as she could in the chilly room. The fire had died in the night, as she'd been too addled to tend it before she went to bed, and now gooseflesh prickled over her skin. The reason for her distraction returned tenfold as she remembered last night, remembered being in Ned's arms, the taste of his kisses. Heat bloomed beneath her skin, a flush of pleasure surging up her neck and staining her cheeks.

She stared out of the window, admiring the strong, handsome man who'd made her quiver with longing as he went about his day. His powerful shoulders filled out his coat superbly, making the lifting and carrying he did look effortless. She watched his large hands as he worked, those strong, capable hands that had touched her with such reverence that the memory of it made her eyes burn with emotion.

As if her thoughts had reached him, he looked up then, to see her watching him from the window. He smiled, and her heart gave three heavy, uneven beats in her chest before she could catch her breath.

She waved at him, feeling giddy and silly, and then laughed as he raised his hand and blew her a kiss.

"Oh, Edward Hardy, what are you doing to my heart?" She wondered aloud.

Tearing herself away from the window she hurried down the stairs, determined to make sure he came into a warm house and that there was a hearty breakfast ready, fit for a working man.



The breakfast *was* plentiful, if not as elegant as she might have hoped. The bread was more evenly cut but still far too thick, she'd broken all the eggs again and almost, but not quite, burnt the bacon.

Ned ate every scrap, showing every sign of pleasure and mopping up the remaining egg with more bread that she dutifully cut for him.

"That was very welcome." He sighed with contentment. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure," she said, meaning it.

"Ah, well, back out into the cold for me," he said with obvious regret.

"Oh, must you go at once?" she said, and then wished she hadn't. *Fool.* He had a farm to run and there were no doubt a thousand jobs for her to do, if only she had the slightest idea what they were. "Forgive me, of course you must. You've better things to do, I know."

"Not better, lass," he said, reaching out to take her hand. "I'd happily stay by your side if I could."

Grace smiled her thanks at his words, looking down at his hand engulfing hers. She remembered again the way he'd touched her, remembered sitting in his lap last night and felt her heart quicken with anticipation. Would he do that again tonight?

"Couldn't I come with you, about the farm? I won't get in your way," she said in a rush. "I'd only watch."

Pleasure lit his eyes, but he shook his head. "No, lass. Just in case that brother of yours has someone watching the house. We need to keep ye hid until we're wed, but then… if ye would like to come with me, ye may. I'd love to show ye about the place."

"You would?"

He nodded, though his expression grew troubled. "I wouldn't blame ye if ye didn't like it though. What with ye being raised a lady, it'll not be what ye are used to. It's a rough, mucky place, especially in the winter."

"You love it," she said, and he nodded.

"Aye."

"Then I shall love it too."

He stared at her for a long moment and then got to his feet, moving to stand beside her. He bent, his fingers gently tipping her chin up to him as he leaned in and kissed her. It was a soft press of lips, tender and full of promise.

"I don't know what I did to deserve such sweetness, but I'll do my best for ye, Grace. I'll do all in my power to make ye happy."

He kissed her again and then moved quickly, grabbing his coat, boots, and hat, and hurrying out of the kitchen. Grace smiled, knowing he had fought the temptation to stay with her and experiencing a rush of contentment.

She worked hard that morning, clearing away the breakfast things and scouring the recipe book for things she could manage for dinner.

Ned appeared again at midday and she fed him the rest of the soup they'd had last night, and thick slices of bread spread with dripping and sprinkled with salt. He kissed her again before he left, a little more fiercely this time and, when he'd hurried away, he left her breathless and flushed.

Once she'd done all she could to prepare for the evening meal, Grace investigated the house. Ned had told her to poke about as she wished, seeing as how she'd be mistress of the place in a few days. His words had provoked a strange, almost proprietary emotion, and not just for the house.

There were two main rooms downstairs, with the huge brick fireplace separating them in the middle, and the stairs to the upper rooms to the side of it. On one side was the large kitchen, and on the other a room that Ned referred to as *the hall* but which appeared to Grace to be a comfortable and spacious parlour. The furniture was covered with sheets and Ned had admitted he'd not used the room since Sarah died.

Grace pushed aside an unwelcome stab of mingled jealousy and sorrow, wondering if this room held many happy memories for him of his late wife. She ought not to begrudge such memories—it was uncharitable, unchristian—yet she felt like an intruder, an interloper who had inveigled her way into his life and his home when she had no right to do so. She wanted the right to be there. To be with him.

How strange that she had known him such a short time, and yet she would trust him more than she would ever trust her own brother. He'd earned that trust in a matter of hours, with his honesty and his

goodness, and she felt a rush of tenderness for him. How restful it was to be with a man who would not flare up with temper if one said the wrong thing, who would not react with violence or weeks of silence as punishment for whatever crime she'd committed. She knew she could not be certain he did not harbour those traits, or similar ones, not yet, but every instinct told her Edward Hardy was decent to his bones and she clung to that belief.

Carrying on her investigations, Grace discovered the milk house or dairy, a brewhouse and a large storeroom. Everything was well stocked and cared for and spoke of a prosperous, well-managed farm.

Returning to the parlour, Grace tugged the covers off the furniture, determined that she would create new memories for him, happy ones that she could share with him. With an exclamation of surprise and delight, she uncovered a small piano. Whilst she had now surmised that Ned was comfortably off, a yeoman of some standing going on his clothes and the size and quality of his home, a piano was an extravagance that she had not expected.

She hurried to the kitchen and fetched beeswax polish and a soft cloth and set to work cleaning the furniture, leaving the piano until last as she knew the temptation to play it would be hard to resist.

Finally, she looked about the place with satisfaction. The furniture gleamed in the glow of the merry fire in the hearth, and the piano beckoned her. It had been one of her father's punishments, to lock the piano and take away the key when he was displeased with her. It might have appeared to have been a gentle form of retribution to anyone who viewed her life from the outside, but to Grace—who was forbidden so many of life's simple pleasures—it had been torment.

She didn't dare to draw or paint. Her brother had once fancied himself an artist, but it had soon become clear he was mediocre at best. When he'd discovered his sister had far more talent, he'd been fit to be tied. Grace had never the courage to lift a pencil again, let alone a paintbrush. She was allowed to sew, and had become adept at it, but she did not find any great satisfaction in needlepoint, though she liked to mend and repair, which seemed a useful skill and one she could take pride in.

There had been few books at home and most of those were dry texts on the law. Her father despised novels and poetry and believed them unfit for females, whose delicate brains were easily overwrought, and so she was denied any escape from the endless days that blurred one into the next.

Her father enjoyed music, however, and would often ask her to play for him. It had been some small solace to Grace that forbidding

her to play must have hurt him as much as it did her.

She ran her hands lovingly over the keys as she sat down and experimentally touched one or two, delighted as the sound rang out around the parlour. She was unsurprised to discover it could do with tuning, but it was not nearly as discordant as she might have expected, assuming it had been years since they had used it. Her heart lifted as it always did when she played, and she ran through several pieces she knew by heart before turning her attention to the sheet music she'd found. There weren't many, but with delight she found a piece by Ignaz Pleyel, a composer with whom she was familiar.

Setting her fingers to the keys, she played, at once lost in the light, bright, joyful music. It was not an especially complex piece, but played with such speed it needed her hands to fly across the piano. Grace laughed with delight as the music rose to a crescendo and her fingers struck the final notes, the sound ringing through the room. She was breathing hard, more with the glee of being able to play freely than with the effort required for such a piece, which she would usually play with elegant decorum. Anything less would see the piano locked up for a sennight at least.

It was a moment before she realised she was being observed.

Chapter 7

"Wherein a kiss lights more than a spark."



Ned was standing beside the fireplace, staring at her. She could not read his expression, but to her horror there were tears in his eyes. It occurred to her then, and far too late, that the piano must have belonged to his wife. No doubt the music she had played was familiar to him, dear to him, bringing back memories of everything he had lost.

Her throat closed and her cheeks grew hot. She stood quickly, moving away from the piano as though it had scalded her. How stupid she was, stupid and thoughtless. Her eyes burned and she could only think to run away from him, from the strange atmosphere that filled the room. She did, bolting for the door only to fall back with a little shriek as she saw Ned raise his hand, the movement so swift it startled her.

He froze, his face the picture of horror as she flinched and raised an arm to protect herself from the inevitable blow.

"Grace," he said, her name spoken with such shock and dismay she wanted to curl up and die. "Grace, look at me."

It took a great effort of will to do as he asked, but she forced herself to comply.

"Grace, I wasn't going to hurt ye. May God strike me dead if I speak a lie. I have never raised a hand to a woman in my life, and I would rather cut out my heart than hurt ye, lass. I only meant to stop ye running from me. I never meant to startle ye."

She stared at him, aware of the way her heart was hammering in her chest, every instinct on alert, still urging her to flee, but there was no need to run. The realisation took a moment to sink in. She had been thoughtless and probably hurt him, perhaps made him angry, but he would not strike her for it. In fact, now she looked at him, she saw no anger at all in his eyes, only sorrow. That was worse, she discovered. Hurting him with her stupidity was far worse than making him angry when he'd treated her so kindly.

"F-Forgive me," she managed.

He took an uncertain step towards her, holding his hands out as though he was approaching a skittish horse.

“There’s nothing to forgive. I won’t ever hurt ye, Gracie,” he said, his voice so gentle and sincere that Grace could only feel a surge of self-disgust for having distressed him. She burst into tears.

“Grace!”

A moment later, she was enveloped in his arms. She buried her face in his chest, and sobbed her heart out. The terror of her flight, the misery of the past months, all of it bubbled up and escaped as tears rolled down her face and made his waistcoat damp beneath her cheek.

Little by little she calmed herself as he stroked her back and made soft, reassuring noises as though he was soothing a child. How wretched she was, to behave with such an utter lack of care for his feelings, and then to revel in the comfort he offered when her guilt and shame brought her to tears. Nonetheless, revel she did in the feel of his powerful arms about her, in the solidity of the chest her head lay upon, and in the reassuring, thud of his heart. She’d wrapped her arms about his waist, her hands splayed upon his broad back, and it took a supreme effort of will not to allow them to wander, to explore this new and inviting landscape of masculinity.

She took a breath and closed her eyes, inhaling his scent, fresh air and hay and leather, horses and clean linen and the musky aroma of a working man that filled her senses and made her light-headed with desire. That strange, liquid heat pooled low in her belly once again, an ache of longing unfurling beneath her skin, a longing to belong somewhere, with someone… with him.

“I’m s-sorry,” she stammered, struggling for composure as the barrage of emotions and sensations overwhelmed her.

“What on earth for?” he asked.

One large hand cupped her cheek, and she closed her eyes, wanting to purr like a cat and turn into it, seeking further caresses. She held herself very still instead, not wanting to compound her terrible behaviour by giving him a disgust of her. If she were too forward, he might believe the things her brother said about her, that she was mad, or a slut, or whatever slander he’d spoken to justify his actions.

“The m-music,” she managed, forcing herself to meet his eyes, so he could see how sorry she was. “I didn’t think. It must have been s-so painful to hear it played after so long.”

He frowned down at her, looking for all the world like he hadn’t the slightest notion of what she was talking about.

“Painful?” he repeated, so obviously nonplussed that Grace blinked and took a breath.

“After not hearing it played since your wife died,” she ventured, wondering why this were not obvious. “Did… did she play very well?” she asked, thinking it would be an act of contrition to hear him tell her his wife had played like an angel. It would serve her right.

“Ye think my heart is broke,” he said slowly, searching her face as he spoke, “for hearing ye play a piece my wife played for me?”

She nodded, and he smiled, such tenderness in the expression that it was all she could do not to bawl her eyes out with shame.

“Nay, lass.”

He reached out and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, the intimacy of the gesture and the slight brush of his fingers against her skin enough to make her shiver.

“B-But there were tears in your eyes!” she exclaimed, refusing to allow him to shield her from her own insensitivity.

“Aye, that’s true,” he said, something in his voice making her heart thud unevenly. “Because of the beauty of it, the sight of ye and the music combined. It took my breath away.”

She stared at him, unable to understand but, before she could find words to question him, he lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss felt like a spark that travelled a fiery path to her belly and ignited the combustible, greedy concoction of want and need already gathered there.

It was just a gentle press of lips, but Grace opened to him at once, remembering the delightful play of his tongue against hers when he’d kissed her last night. He groaned and held her closer, and she clung to him, pressing against him. Any thoughts of hiding her wanton nature from him vanished as wanting took hold of her senses.

He took control, deepening the kiss as his hands moved over her, sliding down her back. Encouraged that he might not mind if her hands explored a little too, she allowed one to slide over his back, while she reached up to his neck with the other, sliding it into his thick dark hair and delighting in the silky warmth she found.

His lips left hers and she almost protested until he pressed them to the delicate skin beneath her ear and kissed her there. She shivered and sighed, and the kisses carried on in a heated trail down her throat. Grace tilted her head to allow him to continue, and he made a sound of such desperation it tugged at something low and primal. The throb between her legs that had begun the moment he’d kissed her became so insistent she writhed against him, seeking relief. His hands dropped, cupping her behind and pulling her against him.

Grace gasped, aware of his hard arousal pressed against her belly.

He stilled at once, pulling back to look at her. Why, she wasn't certain, she was only aware of the need, of the hollow sensation coalescing at the juncture between her thighs, and the urgent desire to rub it against that hard, virile part of him that burned against her belly. She pressed harder, inarticulate but wanting and it was his turn to gasp.

She wasn't quite certain what happened, he moved so fast, but the next she knew he was sitting on the piano stool and she was straddling his lap and, though too many layers of clothing kept them apart, his deliciously hard member was exactly where she'd wanted it. He held her hips in his big hands, his eyes never leaving her face, and rocked against her.

Sparks exploded behind her vision, a burst of pleasure glittering through her like a firework upon a black, velvet sky as she closed her eyes. She made a sound which she thought perhaps she should be ashamed of, but Ned only groaned and whispered in her ear.

"Oh, yes, Gracie, like that. Don't stop. Use me as ye want. Take your pleasure."

And so she did, moving with him, against him as he held her and kissed her and told her how beautiful she was. It was instinctive and lewd, and she didn't care, following the murmuring sound of his voice that led her on, and clinging to him until she was breathless and mindless. She faltered then, aware that there was something beckoning her and uncertain whether to reach for it. It was bright, and she feared it would overwhelm her. Uncertainty made her open her eyes, only to find herself fall into the warmth and security of his gaze upon her.

"Yes, love," he murmured, coaxing her on. "That's the way, my beauty, don't stop."

She didn't, held safe in his arms and by the obvious pleasure in his dark eyes. Grace cried out, clinging to him and muffling the sounds that tore from her against his neck as he too shuddered and made a sound so raw and powerful she felt it in every particle of her body and soul.

They didn't move, just held each other, both breathing hard, and Grace didn't dare look at him, too exposed by what they'd done, though they were both still fully dressed. Her heart hammered, and she felt the echo of it in his chest, as though they were racing together, in perfect accord.

"Ah, lass," he murmured against her hair. "I know I ought not have taken such a liberty, but I can't regret it. I'd forgotten what it was to feel so alive."

She drew back a little and found an expression of wonder in his eyes.

"My wife never played that music, Grace. She never played at all. I bought the piano for her as a gift on our first anniversary, but she didn't want it. We had a grand row about how much money I'd wasted on it, but I was too stubborn to take it back. I tried to learn myself, but… well, I've no aptitude for it, put it that way," he said with a wry smile.

Grace stared at him, unable to comprehend any woman who could be unmoved by such a beautiful gift. Perhaps understanding her bewilderment, he carried on.

"Sarah was a practical woman," he said, smiling—at the memory of his wife, she supposed. "She had no time for romance or what she viewed as frivolity. Either you were awake and working, or sleeping."

Grace gave an exclamation of dismay as she realised how badly she must measure up to his first wife.

"The dinner!" she said, turning to see it was dark outside. "It isn't done. The meat is raw and—" Grace dashed away an angry tear, furious with herself. "You've been working all day in the cold, and you don't even have a hot meal ready because I was so busy p-playing —"

He stopped her mouth with another kiss and she was helpless in the face of such an argument. She sighed and allowed him to soothe her all over again.

"That's enough of that now," he said, his voice firm. "If ye think I'd swap the last hour for a hot meal, you've not the sense ye were born with."

Grace glanced at him, uncertain, but found only amusement in his eyes.

"Ye had best let me up, love," he said with a heavy sigh. "All my good intentions are being sorely tested and I'm not sure how I'll endure until ye are my wife." He kissed her nose and helped her from his lap. "I must go and clean up," he said, grimacing a little. "And when I come down, we'll find something quick to eat and then ye can play some more for me, if ye would?"

"Of course," she said, astonished by this man and his kindness and understanding. "I would like that very much."

He nodded and Grace watched him go, her heart full of wonder and hope.

Ned made a face as he peeled the sticky material from his skin. He still couldn't believe he'd spent in his britches like some wet–behind-the-ears lad. There'd been no other option, though. He'd not have halted her pursuit of pleasure for any price, bewitched by the sight of her, by the feel of her, and if he'd dared free himself from the confines of his clothes she'd have been on her back with her skirts around her ears and he'd have burned with shame when he walked her up the aisle. As it was, he prayed God would forgive him the lapse after so many years of abstinence. Surely a man could not be expected to resist when he had a goddess in his lap and his heart was bursting, not to mention less romantic parts of his anatomy.

"Thank ye, God," he said, closing his eyes and putting his heart and soul into the words as he stood in the chill of the bedroom. He smiled as he realised she'd also forgotten to light the fire or put any hot water out for him to wash in. He didn't give a damn. "Thank ye, thank ye, thank ye."

He hurried back downstairs to find his betrothed sheepishly tending the fire. Ned grinned at her.

"Let's see what Mrs Tucknott has in that pantry for us, eh?"

She blushed, still mortified, and Ned took her hand and tugged her along in his wake, too happy to pretend he could bear to be out of her company for the time it would take to find something to eat.

He piled the remaining meat pie, cheese, bread, and butter onto a tray, along with two apples and a jar of chutney, some ale, and several thick slices of seed cake. Hefting it, he made to carry it back to the kitchen and then stopped.

"Gracie," he said. "Would ye run to the bedroom and fetch a blanket for me, love?"

She looked a little startled but didn't hesitate. "Of course, Ned."

When she appeared again, he moved through the kitchen, waiting for her beside the piano. "Put it on the floor there, in front of the fire."

He wondered if she would protest or question him, but she didn't, and he watched as she took care to tug all four corners of the blanket out to sit flat. Ned grinned at her and knelt, setting out the food like a picnic. "If I were courting ye properly, I might invite ye to a picnic with me," he said, glancing at her and wondering if she thought him a fool. Sarah would have. She'd have rolled her eyes and told him not to be so bloody daft. "It's not the weather for it now, though, and…." He shrugged, not wanting to mention her brother or the odd situation in which they found themselves. "Well, we'll have our picnic indoors, if that's all right?"

She beamed at him, such pleasure in her eyes his heart lurched in his chest. Good Lord, how was a man supposed to withstand a smile like that? His brain was melting into something gooey and malleable, and he knew this woman could wrap him around her slender finger if she ever wanted to. He'd do anything for her, get anything for her. A fine lady like her would want clothes and jewels, though, and he felt a stab of fear as he wondered how he could provide such things. The farm was prosperous thanks to a deal of hard work and good management. He'd bought another thirty acres last year to add to the fifty he had, an unimaginable achievement when he thought of where he'd begun. He'd made a grand success of it, by the standards of his own class….

But she was not of his class.

He was beneath her and he knew it.

"How lovely," she said, sitting down on the edge of the blanket, her beautiful blue eyes sparkling sapphire bright in the firelight. "A winter picnic."

"In the spring, when the weather is fine, we'll do it properly," he promised, a vision of his wife lying among a meadow of wildflowers and holding her arms out to him making his heart thud and his cock leap to attention.

Behave, ye daft bugger, ye've had all yer gettin', he scolded the part of his anatomy which possessed a mind all of its own.

"That sounds perfect," she said with a sigh before gazing at the spread before them with regret.

"Did I forget something?" he asked, frowning.

She shook her head. "No, it's quite wonderful. I'm just so cross with myself. I had intended to make you a splendid dinner and…." She gave a rather bitter little laugh. "What a dreadful wife I shall make you! I shouldn't blame you in the least if you turned me out in the cold and washed your hands of me."

The very idea made Ned's heart clench, and he snatched up her hand, making her start with surprise. "*Never* say that. Don't ever think it. I shan't, I promise ye. It's yourself who ought to be concerned as ye shall find a deal to want in me as a husband. Ye ought to marry a fine gentleman, a nobleman, even. A man who could buy ye everything ye deserve and take ye to the theatre and grand balls, parties where ye could dance and wear fine gowns and…."

He trailed off as the images he spoke of became too vivid in his mind.

"I don't want that," she said, squeezing his hand and bringing his

attention back to her, to here and now.

"That's because ye were afraid and unhappy," he said, his chest tight with anxiety. "The roughest refuge can feel like a palace when desperation nips at yer heels, but when the fear is gone—"

"No." She was staring at him now, her fingers tight about his own and a glimmer of steel in the blue that he'd not expected. "No."

He let out a sigh and smiled, wanting to be reassured by her certainty but far from convinced. It was foolish to borrow trouble, though, and in this moment he was happy, and he thought perhaps she was too. Ned raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them.

"Let's eat," he said.

They ate everything he'd brought and Ned fed her pieces of cake, feeling like a lowly servant to the goddess he'd compared her to, and loving every moment. He laughed as she sipped at the ale, wrinkling her pretty nose with distaste and kissed her for trying. Little by little Ned urged her to talk, to tell him about her life. Happier memories emerged of the time when her mother still lived, and they would escape into the garden together and share picnics like this one, but there were darker memories too. She confessed to the dreams she'd had of running away to London or Paris, and the thought of it made him sick with terror. She looked rueful at his obvious horror and admitted it would never have happened, she'd been too scared… and then she remembered that she had run into the night after all, because what awaited her had frightened her more than London or Paris.

Ned made her smile again by telling her stories of himself as a boy, and the scrapes he'd gotten into. His parents had been good people, solid and reliable, and his childhood had been a happy time. He made her laugh with silly tales of boyhood pranks and mischief, and revelled in the sound of her happiness. Then, at his insistence, she returned to the piano and played for him. Ned closed his eyes and prayed that he could have this, that he could keep this, this unutterable joy she had brought into his life.



The next days passed in a dreamlike haze of happiness.

Grace took pains to ensure the house was warm and clean and a hot meal awaited him when he came in from the cold. They talked for hours and Ned was astonished by how genuine her interest in the farm appeared to be. Blushing hard, she'd confessed her desire for a large family, and he'd held her hand, assuring her he wanted the same. The smile she'd given him had stolen what remained of his heart. When she asked why he and Sarah had no children themselves, he'd just told

her they'd not been so blessed. Speaking of Sarah made him uneasy and he avoided it. The last thing he wanted was for Grace to believe Sarah had been unhappy with him, so he brushed over it and made his marriage appear a deal happier than it had been. Instead, he told her of his plans for the future, of more land he had his eye on, of the jobs that needed doing, of the crops he'd planted and his battle to keep the birds away, and of his breeding plan for the fine, healthy flock of sheep he'd raised. She blushed a little when he spoke plainly of the ram and the beast's indefatigable prowess, but did not appear dismayed by the conversation, rather riveted in fact. In return, she spoke of her own life and Ned's heart broke for the narrow existence she'd endured.

During the day she studied the cookbook like a bible, with her the most devoted of worshippers. There was a deal of household advice in the back pages which she also took to heart, and Ned's boots were polished and waterproofed with a mixture of tar, tallow, and beeswax and then polished to a shine, despite his protests that she'd ruin her lovely hands.

Instead, she worried more about *his* hands, ever more roughened and chapped by the freezing weather, and made him a cream scented with rose water that she insisted he used. He did, but only because he feared they would be too coarse for her fine skin when he was finally allowed to touch her, when she was his wife at last. The thought of his work-abraded hands on her silky skin, cupping her full breasts and sliding between her thighs had him hard in an instant. He was forced to pretend he'd forgotten a vital job in the yard, and brought himself off behind one of the barns with a muffled cry of relief.

He was walking a knife edge and took care not to overstep. He would allow himself only a chaste kiss when they said goodnight and didn't dare touch her again, though he saw the invitation in her eyes and her obvious puzzlement that he wouldn't hold her to him again.

By Thursday night, he was beside himself with anticipation and glowered up at a white sky that threatened snow with a curse.

"Please don't," he said, taking his hat off and staring up at the heavens, to the place where he imagined the almighty must be having a nice little chuckle at his expense. "Have pity," he begged. "I'm flesh and blood, and I never pretended to be a saint. I can't take much more."

He tramped back to the house with his guts in a knot, wondering if they'd be knee-deep in snow by morning.

Chapter 8

“Wherein… a winter bride.”



It was always dark when Ned rose, but it was far earlier than usual this morning. He’d been awake most of the night, his eye on the soft flakes that fell in whispers beyond the kitchen window.

He’d got up more than once and stuck his head out of the front door to check how much had fallen. For now it had barely settled, but he was not relieved. If it fell thick and fast for the next hour, they might get stuck on the way to town or, if it got heavier later, get snowed in once they were there, and who was there to feed the beasts whilst they were away? He’d allowed for being away one night, wanting Grace’s wedding night to be special for her. It would mean an early start next morning to get back to the animals, but at this time of year there ought to be no difficulty in getting a room in one of the better inns.

He thought about his wedding night as his heart thudded in his throat and his blood left his brain in a rush, heading south.

The idea of leaving a bed that Grace was in while the sky was still dark struck him then.

Idiot.

The roads might be cleared of snow or ten foot high with it, but there was nothing on God’s green earth powerful enough to make him cut their wedding night short. There was no option, then; he’d have to call in on one of his men on the way and arrange for them to tend to the animals. Then at least they’d be cared for if the roads were too bad.

Today’s plan was simple. They’d leave in the dark, hopefully long before whatever poor blighter was being paid a pittance to keep an eye out for Grace felt any desire to leave his warm bed.

Ned knew there *was* someone.

Though he’d hoped he was wrong, he had evidence now. He’d kept the knowledge to himself for fear of frightening Grace, but Ned had seen the signs. The ground was frozen solid, or he’d have noticed before. It was hard to hide footprints on a muddy farm, but not in this frigid weather. It was also hard to hide the cloud of a man’s breathing in the cold, even if he’d ducked behind the pig shed and kept his head down. The stupid bastard had smoked a pipe, though, and Ned had

caught the scent of it, unmistakable on the clean, cold air.

The urge to grab whoever it was by the neck and shake him was tangible, but Ned resisted. Better the devil grew bored and told Carrington there was nothing to see. Happily, the house was at such an angle to the rest of the farm that the windows could not be seen unless you stood in the open yard. Rufus would have raised merry hell if the fellow had dared it, so there was no way he'd glimpsed Gracie.

Gracie.

His heart skittered in his chest.

By tonight, God willing, she'd be his wife. It seemed too extraordinary and something like terror struck him deep inside with the fear that she'd be taken from him and there'd be nothing he could do to stop them.

No, he reminded himself. He'd fight. He'd die before he let that bastard Carrington, or her vile brother, get their filthy hands on her again. No one would take her from him, not if she didn't want to go, at least. He'd fight the devil himself if he had to. For the first time since he was a young man, the future wasn't a barren field, bare and dusty, but lush and fertile with hope, with dreams he'd given up on what seemed a lifetime ago. Not that there weren't obstacles to overcome, he wasn't that stupid, though the worry that she'd find him an uneducated fool was one of his deepest fears.

Well, if she could learn to cook, he could learn to converse with a lady. He could read and write well enough, so he could educate himself further. He could read about things that interested her. He wasn't a dumb brute, though he suspected he looked the part. Ned knew she loved books, and she'd made a comment in passing that made him think she liked to paint too. The vision of a warm day in spring and the meadows full of wildflowers filled his mind, and there was Grace, sitting and painting the pastoral scene before her. The vision pleased him, and laughter rose in his chest, until he realised that was the kind of thing a lady would do, not a farmer's wife. Anxiety rolled down his spine.

What would people say when they discovered she'd married him?

He knew all too well what they'd say, and felt another shiver of unease. Though she'd not been allowed to socialise a great deal, they'd had neighbours, and she'd said her father had been forced to take her to the occasional dinner party or it would have caused talk. She knew people around here, people of her own class. Those people would sneer and look down on her, just as his kind would view her with suspicion. *Never mind*, he told himself, they'd get through it. Whatever happened, they'd make it work. He'd do anything to make it

work.

Still, fear snaked its way into his heart and coiled uneasily beneath his skin.

Ned dressed quickly in the dark and headed out to deal with the animals, who blinked sleepily at him, bemused by his early arrival and huffing damp clouds into the frosty darkness. Once he was done, he returned to the house and changed into his Sunday best clothes and cleaned his boots. He stoked the kitchen fire and put water on to boil, and then crept up to the bedroom.

He forced himself not to look at the sleeping figure in the bed, instead tending the fire so the room was warm enough for her to wash and dress.

"Ned?"

He stood, his breath hitching as the firelight glimmered upon the tousled golden curls that fell to her shoulders.

"Morning, Gracie," he said, trying not to stare as the too big nightgown fell to expose one creamy shoulder, gilded in the warm glow of the fire. She looked warm, too, warm and soft, and so inviting that his mouth went dry.

"Is it time?"

"Yes, love."

She smiled then, and all the fears he'd felt evaporated as the breath whooshed from his lungs. She looked like a woman who was anticipating the day ahead with every expectation of happiness, not one being led to a fate she had no choice but to accept. He held the image in his mind, in his heart, and knew he'd remember it until the day he died. It would be a talisman against his doubts and fears, and the terror of losing her.

"How handsome you look," she said, admiration in her eyes as she looked him over.

To his chagrin, Ned felt a blush stain his cheeks, but he could not deny the pleasure he took from her words.

"You look like a dream," he said, with far too much emotion in his words. He cleared his throat, aware of how easily he could be distracted, with her being the embodiment of every dream he'd had since the moment she'd fallen into his arms. "I've put water on to boil," he said, moving to take the jug from the nightstand. "I'll bring it up for you."

"Thank you," she said, and Ned would not allow himself to look back at her as he hurried from the room.

He didn't dare. The desire to join her in the bed was so fierce he thought he'd go mad with it, with the desire to slide beneath the warm covers, between her warmer thighs, inside her lush heat….

Oh, God. He almost broke his neck he ran down the stairs so fast. *Stupid bastard.*

Once she was washed and dressed, they ate a hasty breakfast, and Ned ran back up to the bedroom and took blankets from the bed. Silently, he banked the fires and secured the house, instructing Rufus to stand guard, before taking Grace's hand and leading her outside. She paused on the threshold, looking about her and taking a deep breath.

His heart lurched.

"If… If you've changed your mind…." he said, wondering how he'd survive if she backed out now.

"Of course not," she said with a huff, giving him such a look of reproach he wanted to laugh with joy and relief. "It's just nice to be out of doors, that's all."

He let out a shaky breath that clouded about him and tugged at her hand, not wanting her out in the open for too long.

"Hurry, love."

He'd harnessed the horse to the cart in one of the barns, just in case whoever watched them was more diligent than Ned supposed. He helped her climb in and frowned as she removed her bonnet and curled up on the blanket he'd laid down for her.

"I'm sorry—" he began, but she sat up and pressed a finger to his lips.

"I'm not," she said, and laid down again. "Cover me up, if you would, please, Ned."

Ned hesitated and leant down, pressing a kiss to her lips. She closed her eyes and sighed, and some of his tension eased.

"Thank you," she said, smiling. "I needed that."

"Not nearly as much as I did," he murmured, winking at her, and then covering her with two more blankets, before throwing sack cloth over the top of that. Hopefully, if they were observed, it would just look as though he was off on errands to the town.

Ned climbed up and gathered the reins, sent another silent prayer to the heavens, and urged the horse into motion.

Grace curled into the blankets. Though they'd been going barely

ten minutes, she'd lost the feeling in her toes and longed to get up and stamp them, but she didn't dare budge. The rumble of the cart over the rutted road shook her bones but was nothing she couldn't endure.

Now the movement had stopped, however, and she strained her ears for Ned's voice.

He'd stopped to rouse one of the labourers he employed and arrange for him to see to the farm in Ned's absence. Though Ned had assured her before they'd stopped that he'd seen no sign of them having been followed, her senses were all on alert. The sooner they were wed, the happier she would be. She smiled beneath the blankets as she realised how true that was. It wasn't just for safety, to get her away from the brother who'd betrayed her and a man she feared, it was because he made her happy. He talked to her and listened when she spoke; he admired her efforts and never laughed or belittled her even when she made a mess of things. Ned supported her and encouraged her with that gruff voice and the gentle words he found for her, and he looked at her as if she was the beginning and the end of everything… and he made her heart pound.

It had been a week, only a week, since they had met, but in those days—in the intimacy of his home and hours of private conversation—they'd come to know one another. Likely she knew him far better than she might have if he'd courted her properly. That would have meant chaperoned outings where it would have been hard to speak freely. They'd had no such restraint between them, and Grace had no further doubt in her mind. Ned was a good, honest, kind man, and he'd be a wonderful, caring husband. Whether or not he'd ever feel for her like he had for his first wife she might never know. She knew he didn't like to speak of Sarah, but when she'd coaxed him he'd painted a picture of a caring partnership. Sarah had been just as invested in the farm as he was, his triumphs hers. His sorrow at never having had children had been obvious too, and Grace prayed this was something she could give him that Sarah had not. She worried there was little else until she learned how to be a help to him, but he desired her at least, that much was obvious. It was a start. The rest might come in time, if she was good to him.

She had every intention of being good to him.

Voices reached her ear, and she stiffened, holding her breath and not daring to move until she heard Ned's voice. He commanded the horse to walk on, and then Grace heard the jingle of tack as the cart rocked and moved on once more. She still didn't speak, knowing he would tell her when they were safely out of earshot.

"Are ye all right, Grace?" he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Quite all right.”

In truth, she was terribly cold.

“We’re almost there. Once we’re wed, you can sit up beside me. Can ye bear it?”

“Of course,” she said, touched by the concern in his voice. “I’m tucked up in my blankets. Don’t worry.”

There was a sigh which sounded sceptical.

It seemed an age before the carriage halted, and Ned’s face was taut with concern as she emerged from her blankets. They were covered with snow, which still fell in slow, graceful flakes. Grace’s teeth chattered as she blinked in the glare. Although the sun had still not fully risen, the snow covered everything in a pristine white cloak and, after the dark of her hiding place, it was blinding.

“Hells bells, ye are frozen, lass,” Ned cursed, rubbing her arms with vigour.

“I’m-m p-perfectly w-well,” she managed, which might have been more convincing if her teeth hadn’t been chattering quite so violently.

“Ah, lass,” he said, and hauled her into his arms and kissed her.

Grace submitted, although they were in plain sight of the church, melting into him and feeling the warmth of his mouth upon her frozen lips with a sigh of pleasure. He drew back, and she smiled up at him a little hazily.

“That’s warming me up nicely. Could you just do that again and I’ll be quite—”

He did, not waiting for her to finish the sentence but kissing her again, hard and deep. She let out a deep breath, giddy and fuzzy-headed as he released her once more. Goodness, but her husband could kiss. It was impossible to think when his lips touched hers. Thinking was overrated in any case, she decided as she gazed up at him, smiling like a happy drunk, intoxicated with him.

“Come along,” he said, taking her hand as they hurried up the snowy path towards the church.

Ned paused outside the great oak doors, his hand gripping hers so tightly it was almost painful.

“Grace,” he said, his voice low and serious. “There’ll be no changing your mind after we speak the words. Ye will be my wife and… and I’ll not give ye up then, not for anything. I… thought I’d best warn ye.”

“I should think not,” she said, her voice tart and tugged at his hand, dragging him inside.

She could not help but smile a little as he faced the vicar of his parish and haltingly explained that they wanted to be wed at once, that moment, and that he had a common licence ready. The vicar plainly thought Ned had been up to no good, and no doubt believed Grace was in an interesting condition. He was barely civil, and Ned looked a good deal like a scolded boy until the vicar turned his frosty gaze upon Grace.

"Miss…?" he asked with obvious distaste as he verified the details on the licence.

"Miss Grace Honeyfield," Ned said before she could open her mouth. He sounded terse now, his dark eyes glinting. "We're marrying in haste because her brother is a cruel man who has treated her ill, and because he'll be furious when he discovers she means to marry me when she could have had a wealthy gentleman. The lady has done nothing to deserve anything less than your respect and kindness on her wedding day, unless choosing to marry beneath her is a crime against God?"

The vicar, who was a sparse man with a thinning patch of grey hair that stuck out like the feathers on a baby bird, regarded them both for a moment.

"Miss Honeyfield," he said, his tone a deal gentler. "If you would be so good as to confirm your date and place of birth?"

She felt rather than heard Ned sigh, and squeezed his hand before answering the vicar's questions.



A mere ten minutes later and it was done.

Ned walked out of the church holding his wife's hand and feeling dazed at how easy it had been. He paused in the same spot he'd given Grace her last chance to change her mind, looking down at her with wonder.

"No regrets?" he asked hoarsely.

By way of answer, Grace grasped the lapels of his coat and lifted herself up onto her toes. Obligingly, he bent his head and received the kiss she offered.

"Not one," she whispered against his lips.

Ned smiled.

When they were back beside the cart, he picked her up and set her down on the seat with care and then fussed about, covering her with the only dry blanket remaining. Grace snuggled into him as he took his place beside her.

“Well then, Mrs Hardy,” he said, quite unable to keep the stupid grin from his face.

“Well then, husband,” she replied, her blue eyes twinkling.

Ned took the reins up and forced himself to keep his gaze upon the road and not stare endlessly at his lovely wife.



Grace frowned as Ned guided the horse on, and out of the village.

“We came from that way,” she said, turning her head to look behind them.

“Aye,” Ned replied, nodding.

“Then why are we going in the opposite direction?”

He glanced at her and she waited for him to answer, sensing hesitation. “I… I wanted tonight to be special for ye so… I thought we’d go into Hastings.” He paused for a moment. “And because we’re not legally wed until….” He swallowed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Until we have consummated the marriage,” Grace finished for him.

Ned cleared his throat and nodded. “I don’t want to risk returning to the farm until….” He reached and took her hand, and she looked into eyes as rich and dark as chocolate. “Until I have made ye mine, Gracie.”

She smiled at him, something hot and needy burning fretfully inside her as she wondered how long it would take to get to Hastings.

“Besides,” he added. “I’d like to buy ye something pretty to wear. The kind of thing ye ought to have married in, then we’ll have a good dinner at The Stag. I thought we’d spend the night there, too. They say the rooms are the best in Hastings.”

“Oh, Ned,” she said, leaning into him. “I don’t need you to spend your money on me.”

He stiffened at that and she cursed herself, aware she’d said the wrong thing. How stupid. She’d lived with men far different from Ned; vain, prideful men who would become violently angry if that pride was dented. She should have realised that even a man like Ned, as sweet-natured as he was, would be sensitive to such subjects such as his ability to provide for her.

“I’m not a rich man, Grace,” he said, and the words were stilted. “Not by the standards ye are used to, but I’ve blunt enough to see my wife well dressed.”

She nodded, cheeks burning. “I know that, I… I didn’t mean to imply…. Forgive me,” she said, feeling wretched for having ruined the perfection of the morning.

There was a taut silence and then Ned sighed and shook his head.

“Nowt to be sorry about,” he said, his tone gruff. “I’m all on my pride and I know it, only… only, I’d give ye the world, lass. I *will*, as far as I’m able.”

Grace blinked hard as her heart expanded in her chest. “I don’t need or want the world, Ned,” she said. “But I’m so very glad I married you.”

Chapter 9

"Wherein a wedding night to remember."



The snow stopped falling and the sun rose higher while the horse trudged up the rise to Netherfield and they made their way to the seaside town of Hastings. Netherfield was a nothing much sort of village which straggled for a mile or more with no real centre, no church or anything to focus its inhabitants into a coherent community. It was on a high spot of land, though, and the view across the woods and the patchwork of fields below was stunning as the morning light glittered upon the sparkling scene beneath.

"How beautiful it is," Grace said, tucking her hand into Ned's arm.

"Aye," he said, and she turned her head to discover his gaze on her, not the view. "Most beautiful thing I ever saw."

She rewarded him with a kiss and laid her head on his shoulder.

Farther on they came to the village of Battle, with its great abbey. It was an attractive village, more so nestling in the brilliant white quilt that settled peacefully about them. Grace had visited the abbey once as a child, when her mother was still alive. On this quiet, snow-covered morning it seemed nothing bad could happen in such a place and she reflected then how strange it was that the village was named for one of the bloodiest battles the country had ever seen, and famous as the provider of the finest gunpowder in the country, possibly in Europe. Its production had provided powder for battles all over the world, from Blenheim, Quebec and India, to Nelson's Trafalgar and the Battle of Waterloo.

"Are ye frozen, Gracie?" Ned asked, tucking his arm about her. "We could stop at an inn and warm ye up a bit?

Grace leaned into him and shook her head. "No," she said. "I want to get to Hastings." She held his gaze, surprised when the blush didn't come as he stared at her, his eyes darkening.

"Eager for yer wedding night, are ye?"

His voice was low and a little hoarse and Grace did feel a rise of colour then, but did not look away.

"Yes," she said. "I am."

Ned glanced about to see if they were being observed before leaning down and kissing her hard.

“Get on,” he said to the horse, urging it into a trot and snapping the reins.

Grace laughed and Ned turned to grin sheepishly at her.



The Stag, on All Saints Street in Hastings, was a handsome building, though a much more ancient timber body hid behind the elegant facade which had been added in the last century. It towered over the narrow street before it, raised up on a higher level as though it thought itself above the rest of the town with its fine new appearance.

Hastings had become a fashionable seaside resort in the past twenty years or more and, in the summer, the great and the good came for the sea bathing and the fine air, and to see and be seen. Now, in the dead of winter, the crowds vanished and it reverted to the simple fishing village it had once been. The Stag was bustling, however, the inclement weather a good inducement to stop and get a drink or a bite to eat by a warm fire.

Ned thought he might burst with pride as he guided Grace inside. They’d stopped at the dressmaker to order a deal of new things for his wife and, to his relief, the woman had a gown she altered on the spot for Grace to wear at once. It had been ordered for a lady who had never come to collect it, and was last year’s style—which Ned had frowned about—but Grace only rolled her eyes and said it was perfect.

Last year’s style or no, Grace looked every inch the lady she was. The dress was a bright blue, with a darker blue pelisse of heavy velvet trimmed with silk. A bonnet with a velvet bow and ostrich feathers dyed the same colour as the pelisse completed the ensemble. To Ned’s eye she looked like a duchess, and something had shifted in his chest as she’d taken his arm, smiling up at him as they left the shop. It had felt as if the ground had lurched beneath his feet and settled again, but her presence had reshaped the world; it was brighter and warmer and would never be the same.

Now, he felt like the proudest man who ever lived as heads turned and people stared at the fine lady on his arm when they entered the inn.

“I’d like one of your best rooms for the night, for myself and my wife,” he said, a thrill of pleasure rolling through him at the right to call her his own. “Also, the lady requires a hot bath, and we want a private parlour for dinner as soon as is possible.”

“Certainly, sir,” said the inn keeper, beaming at them. “If you would like to come this way.”

They followed the man until a hand reached out and grasped Ned's arm.

"Hardy? That you?"

Ned turned to see a tall, thin man with an improbable violet waistcoat. Mr George Howarth fancied himself a man of fashion and at this moment his curious gaze was fixed on Ned. They widened so far Ned worried they might pop from his head as the man discovered Grace on Ned's arm.

"Mr Howarth," Ned replied, taking the man's hand and hiding his dismay at being recognised.

Howarth was minor gentry who played at farming, and a silly fellow who didn't know one end of a sheep from the other. He was not a bad chap, however, and Ned liked him well enough. At least he wasn't a snob, and would chat amiably enough to Ned when their paths crossed. He was a tattle monger, though, with tongue enough for two sets of teeth, and the story of Ned's marriage to a fine lady would spread like wildfire. Not that it wouldn't have done so, soon enough, but Ned had hoped they might keep it quiet for a few days.

"And may I demand an introduction to the vision beside you, Mr Hardy?" Howarth asked, and Ned realised he must get used to the avaricious look of interest glinting in the fellow's eyes. There would be many like him.

"Aye, ye may," Ned replied. "This is my wife. Grace, this is Mr Howarth. He owns Crockett's Farm, about five miles south of our own."

"Wife?" Howarth exclaimed, his surprise palpable. "When did that happen?"

"Oh, quite recently," Ned replied, evading the question and turning to move on.

"Wait," Howarth said, frowning. "I know you. Miss Honeyfield, isn't it?"

"It was," Grace said, smiling politely, though her expression was strained, her face pale, and her grip on Ned's arm tightened.

"I'd heard you were to marry Carrington," Howarth exclaimed, and then reddened as he realised he'd have been better off keeping his mouth shut.

"Ye heard wrong," Ned said, aware that he sounded murderous, enough so that Howarth took a step back.

"Yes, of course," the man said in a rush. "My mistake. Do forgive me."

Ned nodded, trying not to glower and instead made an effort to rearrange his face into something less than homicidal. “If ye would excuse us,” he added, striving for good manners and guiding Grace towards the innkeeper, who had been waiting patiently for them.



The meal was excellent, and their good spirits were revived by an excellent claret and the warmth of the fire that crackled merrily in the grate. The innkeeper’s wife bustled in and cleared away their empty bowls and the remains of a delicious almond torte, which had been served with thick cream.

“Your room is ready for ye, Mr Hardy, and the bath for Mrs Hardy,” she said as she loaded a tray with the dirty dishes. “I’ll send our boy Thomas in to show ye up, if that suits?”

“Aye,” Ned said, feeling suddenly breathless.

He didn’t dare look at Grace as Thomas arrived, but took her hand and led her in the lad’s wake.

The room wasn’t large, and Ned discovered he couldn’t stand upright at all beneath its low ceiling, heavy with beams. There were thick curtains covering the windows and shutting out the freezing weather beyond, and it was warm and cosy. He knew he’d made the right decision in bringing his wife here for the first night of their marriage.

A massive four poster took up most of the room, piled so high with thick mattresses he’d have to lift Grace onto it. That idea made him breathless. The air was damp with the perfumed scent of the hot water from the large copper bath before the fire.

“Shall I send a maid up to help the lady?” Thomas asked, giving Grace a look which Ned wanted to clip him around the ear for, as the lad accepted a coin for his trouble.

Ned shook his head. “That won’t be necessary,” he said, holding the door open so young Thomas knew in no uncertain terms that he was no longer required.

The lad hurried out and Ned closed the door before turning to look at Grace.

She had her back to him and was investigating the room with interest.

“Will it do?” he asked, wondering if this was fine enough, or if perhaps it was shabby compared to what she was used to.

“It’s beautiful, Ned,” she said softly. “Perfect,” she added, as one elegant hand slid around one of the pillars of the four poster.

“Gracie?” he said, finding his voice sounded odd, rough and uneven. “If I’m dreaming, please don’t wake me.”

Her expression was sweet and happy as she moved towards him and wrapped her arms about his waist, laying her head on his chest.

“It feels like a dream to me too, Ned.” She looked up at him then, her blue eyes so bright it felt like staring at the sky. “I want to dream this dream for the rest of my life.”

“Oh, love.”

He kissed her then, the kiss he’d been longing to give her since the moment he’d seen her that morning, tousled and sleepy, the delicious curve of her shoulder bared to him as she sat up in his bed. The kiss was slow and deep and full of promises, both for the night to come and all the nights to follow.

With difficulty he let her go, breathing hard. “That bath will grow cold. Ye had best make use of it.”

“You had best undress me then, sir,” she said tartly, laughter glittering in her eyes. “As you have decided to be my maid this night.”

“With the greatest of pleasure,” he murmured, allowing himself one last kiss before he turned her and applied himself to the myriad ties and fastenings and the mysteries of a lady’s clothing.

Sarah had worn nothing so fine, and would have scorned to do so, in fact, considering it a waste of money. She’d seen to her own clothes and Ned had never even seen her in a state of undress, let alone naked. His conjugal rights had been given to him begrudgingly, in the dark and with Sarah clothed to the neck in a voluminous cotton nightgown, and so Ned had little experience with such complicated details. His hands seemed too big, too rough and clumsy, and he muttered curses whilst Grace giggled at his frustration.

Finally, he appeared to have come to the end of his travails and only her chemise and stockings remained.

“Turn around, Gracie,” he said, barely whispering the words. The moment seemed too precious, too sacred to speak at all.

She did as he asked, her expression a little shy but undaunted as she met his gaze.

Ned’s breath left him in a slow exhalation. His body had been on the brink of arousal all day, anticipation of the night to come driving him slowly out of his mind whilst worry for all that might go wrong held him in check. Now, though, now she was his wife and he could show her what that meant to him.

The shift was fine and the firelight at her back did little to hide

the curve of her tiny waist, nor the generous flare of her hips. The darker triangle of her sex was a shadowy place between her legs and her nipples were taut, pressing against the shift and making his mouth water.

"A goddess," he said in wonder as he stared at her. "That's what ye are."

She laughed at that, a breathless sound of amusement that made his aching cock leap with eagerness.

"It's true," he insisted, falling to his knees before her. "A goddess stands before me, and I intend to worship her, though I'm unworthy to kiss her feet."

His breath was hard to find as he reached for her, his hands sliding around the stocking encasing one elegant calf with care, afraid his coarse hands would snag the delicate material. His hands slid higher, over the back of her knee, over her thigh, until he found the garter tying it in place. She reached for the edge of her shift, raising it higher so he could see the garter was a bright cherry red.

His breath hitched in throat.

"Red?" he said in surprise, smiling up at her in delight.

"I had a choice," she said, and he saw a glint of something mischievous in her eyes that made his heart race faster. "Green or yellow, or blue—to match the dress—or… red. I thought you would like these best."

"Aye," he said. "Ye thought right and I thank ye for it."

He tugged the first one free, burning with the knowledge that Grace was nothing like Sarah. She enjoyed his desire for her and would encourage it. There was an earthy quality to her that he recognised, and which had survived her cold upbringing. She found no shame in her body, or in his, or the way they could find their pleasure together.

His heart soared.

Ned eased the stocking from her shapely leg and then bent to kiss her toes, smiling at the breath of laughter that escaped her as he did so.

"My own goddess," he murmured as he kissed her feet as he'd promised to do.

Returning his attention to the remaining stocking, he discarded this one a little faster, and sat back to look up at her. Her hands still held the hem of her shift, exposing her thighs.

"Higher," he said, swallowing as she understood at once and

raised the shift to expose the dark gold curls that nestled between her thighs.

He was breathing hard now and wondering how long he could last before his body exploded with lust and wanting.

"If ye are wanting to have that bath, ye had best make haste," he warned her, feeling something hot and primal melting the tenuous grip of his control, like wax over an open flame. "I'm not sure how much longer I can wait."

Happiness bubbled up inside him as she flashed him an impish grin, tugged the chemise over her head and clutched her arms about her breasts to hide them from him as she turned, laughing and stepped into the steaming tub of water.

She could not hide her lovely backside, though, and Ned looked his fill at the way her sleek back tapered to the curve of waist and hips and the lush swell of her bottom. He had to clench his fists to stop himself from reaching out and grasping hold of the fullness revealed to him, but then she'd never get her bath, and she'd been cold all day. He'd not deny her the pleasure of a soak in hot water, no matter his impatience.

Ned forced himself to allow her a few moments privacy and took the time to strip off his own coat and waistcoat and remove his boots. When he turned back, clad in only his shirtsleeves and trousers, it was to find Grace watching him intently.

His cock, already hard, seemed to swell further under her scrutiny and the obvious interest he saw there. Her gaze was heated and it felt as if her hands were already on him, a touch he felt right to the marrow of his bones. He smiled helplessly at her. He was hers, heart and body and soul at her mercy, to do with as she pleased.

He loved her.

Ned wasn't certain when it had happened, though he'd known from the first moment he'd seen her it was inevitable. What man could resist such a combination of sweetness and beauty? Not he. Not that he'd even tried to resist. He'd seen his fate and run towards it full tilt, caring for nothing else. There had been no point in guarding his heart. The poor thing had been living in the dark for so long that even the most fleeting glimpse of the brightness Grace brought to the world would have blinded it and left it dazed and overwhelmed.

He knelt by the tub and reached for the scented soap, lathering it between his palms before reaching for her hand. He washed her, increasingly breathless as his hands slid over her slick skin, up her arms and over her shoulders, her neck. She moved, leaning forward so

he could wash her back and his hands swept down, following the elegant curve of her spine.

She sat back, anticipation in her eyes and he knew his hands trembled as he moved behind the tub and reached forward to run his soapy palms over her breasts. His breathing was ragged now as he cupped the full swells that filled his hands and felt the nipples harden beneath his thumbs.

Ned smothered a groan as he gently squeezed, and he heard her gasp. Grace closed her eyes, her head falling back against the edge of the tub as she arched into his touch.

"So beautiful," he murmured, wishing he were more eloquent, wishing he were a gentleman with a fancy education who could recite poetry, or give her words worthy of everything he felt in this moment.

As it was, he worshipped her, hoping everything he felt could be expressed without words, for he had none to give her. He could barely breathe, let alone speak as his hand slid down beneath the water and sought the secret place between her legs, cupping her sex against his palm.

He watched her face, gazing down at her, alert for the slightest sign of distress or discomfort, but her lips parted on a sigh, her lovely skin flushing a deep pink as she eased her legs farther apart and lifted her hips, pressing herself against his hand.

Ned buried his face in her hair, clinging to the fragile threads of his control as his fingers slid through her curls and inside the tight heat of her body.

"Oh God," he said, ragged now as he lifted his head and watched her as he touched her so intimately.

His free hand toyed with her breast as she sighed with approval, the whispered sound leaving him dazed with desire. The water undulated back and forth as she moved against his hand, unabashed as she took her pleasure and drove him wild with desire.

Her lips curved into a smile and she gasped, her body growing taut as tension simmered through her. She grasped at his arms and flung her head back as she came with a breathless cry that was almost enough to undo him completely. Ned leant down and captured her mouth, kissing her hard and deep, whilst he fought the urge to lift her from the tub and take her on the carpet like a madman. He felt mad, mad with lust and joy, out of control with the barrage of emotions he'd not felt in more than a decade, if he'd ever known them at all. He certainly could not remember a moment which more exquisitely combined the tormenting combination of love and desire and the need

to possess, with the need to take care of and treat the woman before him with the utmost tenderness.

He held her, pressing kisses to her lips, her cheek, and the beautiful line of her neck as she came back to herself.

"How lovely," she murmured, gazing up at him through the haze of pleasure that still filled her eyes. "Thank you."

He laughed at that, helpless to do otherwise. "It was my pleasure," he said gravely.

She sighed and smiled at him. "I'd best get out, so you might wash before the water gets cold."

Ned almost opened his mouth to protest that he didn't want a bloody wash, but thought better of it. He'd not want her thinking he'd not take the trouble for her, so he'd wash, even if the time it took to do so killed him. Was it possible to die from desire? It felt as if it might well be, as his arousal tented his trousers and fought to get free, to get to her.

It was the most delightful form of torture to dry her while his body ached and protested. It continued as he undressed before her, her hot gaze drifting over him as he stripped off first his shirt, and then his trousers and drawers.

Her eyes grew wide and dark, her lips parting a little as he stood before her.

"Oh, Ned," she said, the words spoken with a breathless quality that made his cock leap with pride and desire.

He'd had offers enough from women, even after he'd been married. Offers he'd been too wary of accepting, his confidence too dented by Sarah to try again despite his loneliness, but enough to know that he was well made and handsome enough to turn a woman's head in his direction. It was nothing, though, nothing like having his wife's gaze turn hot and sultry as she looked him over with obvious approval.

"You are very fine," she said, her lovely mouth curving into a smile. "Indeed, I think I must do my wifely duty and help you with your bath."

Ned's mouth grew dry, and he found he couldn't answer, though he wasn't about to deny her if she wanted to wash him.

He stepped into the bath and sat down, though there was barely enough room for him to do so without hanging his legs over the outside of the tub. This he did, watching with a mixture of longing and trepidation as Grace knelt beside the bath. She took a moment to

take the pins from her hair and he watched, entranced as the golden tresses fell to her shoulders before she moved towards him and lathered the soap between her hands.

Ned took a deep breath, very afraid he'd climax the moment she touched him.

He swallowed as she reached for him, lathering first the hair on his chest and working outwards over his arms. He squirmed and laughed as her delicate hands soaped beneath his armpits and she gave a whoop of delighted laughter to discover he was ticklish.

"Oh, that's good to know," she teased. "I shall take full advantage of that in the future."

That mischievous glint lit her eyes again, making his heart squeeze in his chest at how easy this was with her. He'd never imagined he might find such a wife, a woman with a tender heart and a sweet nature, who would not only welcome him into her bed but make him laugh, and laugh with him.

"Gracie," he murmured and reached for her, pulling her to him for a kiss.

Chapter 10

"Wherein the bliss of a shared night, and the reality of a shared future."



Grace was enraptured by her big, beautiful husband. She'd guessed he was a well-made man. No amount of winter clothing could disguise the broad shoulders and powerful arms and the long, strong legs. Guessing and knowing were two very different things, however, and when he'd stood before her, naked and aroused, she'd feared her legs might buckle.

She put her hands on his massive chest, the thick quilting of muscle twitching beneath her fingertips as she soaped his skin, and the liquid heat that had overwhelmed her as he'd pleasured her in the bath rose within her again. The place between her legs was hot and aching and empty, clamouring for him to make her his, demanding with such ferocity it was all she could do to concentrate on the job at hand. Yet she wanted to explore him, and to treat him with the care and tenderness he'd shown her.

It was difficult to take her time, so very difficult when she was eager to touch and discover. His chest was rising and falling with growing speed as she followed the intriguing line of dark hair down his taut abdomen. He shifted, restless beneath her touch, and she looked up to find his dark eyes glittering. If she'd not known in her heart that he was a gentle soul who would rather die than hurt her, that look might have given her pause. It was a little wild, something primitive and urgent glinting there that made her own heart thud harder still, and the throb between her legs kept time with it, pulsing with need.

She slid her hand beneath the waterline, and he groaned, deep and low, as she found what she sought and curled her fingers about him. He was hot, so hot and so hard, so large she trembled at the idea of him inside her, even as her eager body thrummed with exhilaration and impatience.

"Oh, God, Gracie," he said, and she felt the power of the body that quivered beneath her hands, felt instinctively the tremendous force of will holding him still, allowing her to touch him as she wished.

She wanted at once, and with a desperate desire, to see that control shatter for her. Guided by memories of what she'd seen in the stable all those months ago, and an innate knowledge of what seemed right, she slid her hand down the hard length of him and up again.

His long fingers curled on the edges of the bathtub, clutching so tight his knuckles went white. Grace did it again and saw the muscles in his arms bulge, his huge shoulders set in a rigid line. She thought perhaps he was holding his breath.

Grace decided this was a good sign and carried on, picking up speed and watching with fascination as her husband's big body trembled and he sweated and gasped and, at last, he shattered. His cry of pleasure was harsh and guttural as his large frame bowed and shuddered helplessly, sending a visceral thrill of desire burning through her like a flame catching dry tinder.

She let go of him and sat back, staring, a little overwhelmed by what she'd done to him. He was very still for a moment, breathing as if he'd run for miles, and then he laughed.

Grace felt an answering smile tug at her own mouth as he turned to look at her.

"Aye," he said, his tone wry. "Ye might well look smug, ye little devil. Now ye know as well as I do, ye have only to crook ye little finger and I'm at yer mercy."

She did smile then, and she didn't doubt she looked smug indeed, smug and happy.

He stood then, the water sliding from him and making him look like Poseidon rising from the sea. Her mouth opened with wonder at the sight. He truly was magnificent.

She watched as he made short work of washing the parts of him she'd missed, and then he stepped out of the bath. He snatched up a towel and gave himself a perfunctory wipe down with it before flinging it to one side and advancing on her with a wicked glint in his eyes.

"Turnabout is fair play, Gracie," he said, a warning note to the words.

"B-But that was m-my turnabout," she protested.

Not that she cared—she was more than happy to let him have another turn—but it was a game, and she sensed it would delight him to have her tease him. So she darted away, giggling and letting the towel fall to the ground when he lunged towards her.

The room was small, and he was large, and she didn't really want to evade him, so it was a matter of moments before he caught her and swept her up. Grace threw her arms about his neck and kissed him, still smiling as her lips touched his and he carried her to the bed.

He laid her down and settled beside her, gazing at her in such a

way that Grace felt every inch the goddess he'd compared her to.

"My beautiful wife," he murmured, such reverence in his tone that Grace wondered if it were possible she could fill the void his first wife had left after all. She hoped so, with all her heart, for she had fallen irrevocably in love with her husband.

His hands moved over her, his rough palms gentle and warm.

Grace sighed. "I love your hands," she said, covering the one which cupped her breast. "I've dreamed of having your big hands on me."

Surprise lit his eyes and she knew she'd pleased him. "I worried they were too rough. You're like silk, Gracie, so delicate. I worried they'd damage your fine skin."

She laughed at that. "Foolish man, I'm all a-tremble for your hands. They're just the right amount of rough, and…." She shivered as his hand slid over her belly. "Quite delicious."

His gaze was intent as his hand moved lower still, until he found the place which clamoured for him. Grace shivered with pleasure as his hand slid between her legs and watched his face as she heard his sharp intake of breath.

"Do ye need me here?" he asked, his voice almost a growl.

Grace gasped as he slid one finger inside her, arching and opening to him, to his touch.

"Oh, wicked man, that's—"

The finger slid back and forth and stole her reason.

He bent and nuzzled her breast, moaning quietly. "Ye do want me," he said, the words full of masculine pride and tinged with awe. "Ye need me here, ye need me badly, don't ye?"

It was difficult to form an answer as her brain had ceased to function, only her body responded now, though the words were dragged from some dim part of her mind through the thick fog of desire.

"Yes, yes," she said. "Yes, please."

"Hmmm," he said, the sound a rumble that thrummed through his chest and into her.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her stomach, swirling his tongue around her navel as she squirmed beneath him.

"Ah-ha," he said, amusement lighting his dark eyes as he raised his head. "Ticklish?"

"N-No," she protested, and then squealed as he did it again,

wriggling his tongue into her navel until she shrieked and gave in. “Yes, yes,” she admitted. “I am.”

Ned chuckled, his breath huffing against her skin and setting her to shivering again. The sensation began inside her too, her body quivering inside and out as his mouth trailed hot kisses over her, his tongue painting a line down the juncture of her thigh. He moved down the bed, spreading her legs wide and bending his large frame to the task. Grace clutched at the bedclothes beneath her, tension singing through her until he parted the delicate folds of her private flesh and swept over her with his tongue.

She made a sound, so wanton and so loud she could hardly believe it. For a moment she stilled, wondering if she’d shocked him, but then she heard a huff of amusement, the little breath of air against her oversensitive skin enough to make her whimper.

“Like that, did ye?” he murmured. “Let’s see what else pleases my lady.”

It seemed a great deal pleased her as his clever tongue sent her spiralling into that giddy, wonderful place where her body was nothing but sensation and she knew only pleasure. She climaxed with a ferocious cry, her fingers clutching at his hair as waves of intense joy rippled through her.

She looked up, incoherent and dazed still to discover Ned moving over her, taking his place between her legs.

“I can’t wait any longer, love,” he said, sounding almost apologetic.

Grace thought that rather funny and laughed a little as she slid her arms around him, her legs sliding over the backs of his as she lifted her hips to him.

“Me either,” she managed, before his mouth covered hers and he was pushing inside her.

“Oh, love, you’re so tight, I don’t want to hurt ye,” he said, though the words were edged with desperation.

“You won’t,” she said, stroking his back to soothe away his concerns. “Don’t stop.”

He filled her in one, strong thrust and then stilled as she gasped and clung to him, his powerful frame trembling in her arms.

“Grace?” he said, seeking reassurance that she was not hurt.

She couldn’t answer for a moment, not from pain, but from the strange sensation, the fullness. It wasn’t comfortable, but it didn’t hurt.

“I’m fine,” she managed, though it sounded breathless. “Don’t stop.”

Carefully, he moved again, and this time when he slid home, it was easier. Grace felt the tension leave her body by degrees as he moved and the first tendrils of pleasure at the feel of him inside her.

“Oh,” she said, smiling now.

Ned lifted his head, such a look in his eyes that her heart expanded, filling her chest so completely that she felt she might burst from happiness. She reached up and touched his face.

“I love you,” she said.

He made a sound, incoherent but heartfelt, as he sought her mouth and kissed her.

There was nothing else said after that, only sounds of pleasure and ecstatic cries as they discovered the happiness to be found in their union. As the peak shimmered behind her eyes once more, Grace clung to him, laughing as joy glittered through her.

Ned’s powerful frame shuddered, and the sound he made as he took his pleasure and spilled inside her was raw and fierce and made her feel alive in a way she’d never known possible.

“Gracie,” he said, once he could speak again. He rolled to one side and pulled her into his arms, kissing her over and over. “My beautiful Gracie.”

“All yours,” she agreed, as she laughed and cried at once.

He kissed away her tears and she tumbled into a dreamless sleep, safe and happy for the first time in her life.



“I don’t want to leave,” Ned said as he picked up his hat from the bed and looked around to make sure nothing had been forgotten.

He felt as if he’d been living in a dream, the most perfect, wonderful dream he’d ever had. He’d never known such joy, such pleasure could be found with another. Before he’d married there had been lovers enough. He’d been young, lusty, and good-looking, and there had been plenty of lasses willing to take a tumble with him. Yet, though there had been those he’d been fond of—one he might even have married if Sarah hadn’t caught him—he’d never loved before. Not like this. Not with the intensity of feeling that made him believe Grace had been knitted into every fibre of his being. The bursting sensation of love that filled his chest, and the hot surge of desire that shot straight to his loins whenever he looked at her, were overwhelming.

There was foreboding in his heart, though, and he feared if they left this room the world would intrude, and their idyll would shatter.

It made his heart hurt.

"Me either," Grace said, moving to him and slipping her hand into his. "But it will be nice to go home too, won't it?"

There was an edge to her voice, and he knew what she feared: that her brother would hear the news and come looking for her, or that perhaps Mr Carrington, with his wealth and his power, would seek retribution. Those were things he didn't fear. If any man came after Grace—if either of them ever hurt her, or tried to, by word or deed—Ned would break them.

No, it was life he feared. The kind of life he led that she'd only had a taste of as yet. The kind of life she ought to be above, and the way those she'd known before she married him would treat her.

She'd said she loved him, and the knowledge blazed inside him like a beacon and his heart huddled beside it, clinging to the warmth it gave him. Yet love didn't always endure in the face of hardship or adversity, not if it wasn't strong enough. He'd rescued her, and she was grateful for that, she'd found safety with him and much of what she felt was because of that safety.

Would she love him still when her new life had lost its novelty, and she realised the world she'd been born to was gone forever….

"It will," he said, leaning down to kiss her nose. "It will be good to be home… and to share my bed with ye," he added, smiling at her as she laughed and the weight in his heart eased at the sound of it.

"Yes," she said, nodding her agreement, a naughty glint in her eyes. "And the house will be cold when we get in, so we shall have to light the fires and go straight to bed to keep warm, until the chill has gone."

Ned kissed her properly for that, still stunned by the ease with which she owned her desire for him, for the pleasure she took in his body, in her own. Sarah had made him feel ashamed and frustrated by his needs and wants, but that was long forgotten now.

"Come on then, Mrs Hardy, before I tumble ye onto yer back once more and have my way with ye."

"Wicked man," she said with a sigh, though her blue eyes twinkled with mirth and he was sorely tempted to do just that.

Wanting to put off the return to reality for as long as possible, Ned insisted on taking her shopping. Though the fashionable set were gone for the winter, there were shops of the kind she'd not find closer to

home, and he wanted her to have everything she could desire. It would be a while before they left the farm again, especially if the weather closed in. When there were animals to feed and preparations to be made for crops and planting, it was not an easy thing to leave the farm unattended for long.

As ever, she was reluctant to spend his money, but he persuaded her to buy two books—novels of the kind her father had denied her—and a good pair of sturdy boots that were fashionable but able to withstand the rigours of farm life. He also bought her a soft cashmere wrap, the price of which made his eyes bulge, but it was a vibrant sapphire blue and matched the colour of her eyes, and he couldn't leave the shop without buying it for her.

"No," she insisted sternly, though she was laughing too. "I've been so spoiled, Ned, truly. The only thing I want now is to go home with you. To *our* home," she added, the tone of her voice such that Ned stopped in his tracks as the desire to kiss her, here in public, was almost overwhelming.

"Miss Honeyfield?"

They turned to see two young women, and an older lady Ned assumed to be their mother, hurrying towards them. Ned stiffened as he took in the finery of the ladies' apparel. The mother had a fur-lined cloak which only made her ample figure look rather like a ship in full sail as the wind caught it. A gloved hand held it tightly as the other righted her bonnet, so over-trimmed with ribbons, lace, and faux fruit it was a wonder the seagulls hadn't taken a fancy to it and snatched it from her head.

"It *is* you," said one of the young women, an attractive brunette of an age with Grace, whose curious gaze darted between him and his wife.

"It is indeed," Grace replied easily as she greeted the women. "How do you do?"

The ladies replied that they did very well, thank you, though they were obviously rabid with the desire to know why Grace was walking unchaperoned with a man.

"Mrs Norrell, Miss Norrell, Miss Eliza, may I present my husband to you, Mr Edward Hardy."

There was a stunned silence.

Ned bowed, too aware of the widening of the women's eyes and the way they looked him up and down, seemingly appalled. There was a glint of interest in the young ladies' expressions, but it was the kind of appraising look they might have given a prize bull, not the kind

reserved for a gentleman.

“Hardy?” Mrs Norrell repeated, a nervous edge to her voice. “I don’t think I know any Hardys from these parts. Are your people from —”

“Yes, you do, mama,” said, Miss Eliza, giggling a little. “Mr Hardy owns that sheep farm at Burwash Weald. He bought some land from Papa last year. Didn’t you, Mr Hardy?”

“Aye,” Ned said, nodding, though for a fraction of a second some ridiculous part of his heart urged him to deny it. Then pride reared its head, and he stood a little taller. He had bought land, and he’d be buying more. He was no pauper, no gentleman, but not a man with nothing to offer either. “That’s right.”

“Oh,” said Mrs Norrell, as she looked from him to Grace and back again with growing horror. “Oh,” she repeated, clearly at a loss. “Well, girls, we mustn’t linger. Papa will wonder where we’ve got to. Good day to you, Mr Hardy, M-Mrs Hardy.”

The women hurried away, the girl’s giggles audible as the wind caught them and delivered them in their wake. Ned gritted his teeth, rigid with tension, and then looked around in surprise as Grace went off into peals of laughter.

“Oh!” she said, clinging to his arm and pressing her free hand to her chest. “Oh, dear, how wretched of me, but I did enjoy that.”

Ned stared at her, nonplussed. “Enjoyed it?” he repeated, indignant and growing angrier by the minute. “They think ye have sunk far beneath their notice. I bet ye anything they cut ye dead the next time ye see them in the street.”

She stilled beside him, her laughter dying away.

“We can only hope,” she said, holding his gaze. “Mrs Norrell is a dreadful woman. Miss Eliza is not so bad, but Miss Norrell is a spiteful cat and I dislike her intensely, and if you think I did not enjoy the envy in their eyes at discovering I’d married such a big, handsome fellow, you have a greater estimation of my character than I deserve.”

Ned snorted and walked on, simmering still. “Envy is not what they were feeling at news of your marriage to me.”

Grace shrugged. “Well, I’m not sure I agree about that, but they are fools if they don’t envy me. Those two are each likely destined for marriage to some chinless, over-bred fool who will ignore them and leave them to the running of house and children whilst he turns his attention to his mistress. If they are lucky, he won’t be cruel, but there is no guarantee of that.”

“They’ll have their rightful place in the world and no one to look down upon them.”

“Oh, Ned,” she said, shaking her head. “Don’t be so naïve. There is always someone to look down upon you. When they go to London, the fashionable and all those who rank above them—of which there are many—will look down upon them as they try to edge their way higher in society.”

He snorted, but said nothing.

They returned to the stables behind The Stag, and Ned set about harnessing the horse ready for the return journey. Try as he might, he couldn’t stop hearing the women’s mocking laughter. It rang in his ears and reproached him for what he’d done in keeping Grace with him. He’d been a selfish bastard.

They were silent as he helped her up into the cart and he cursed himself as he realised how odd it looked for such a fine lady to travel in such a lowly vehicle. He’d have to buy a gig at the very least, something elegant that she’d not be ashamed to be seen in.

The silence pressed down upon him as he guided the horse out of the yard and onto the road and, though he longed to break it, he was too tangled up inside. He was angry with himself, angry with those three awful bloody women, angry at the world as he acknowledged the fact that his wife would undoubtedly come to feel ashamed of him. How would it feel to see that shame in her eyes when he already loved her beyond bearing?

He simmered, his thoughts snarled in a dark morass and Grace let him be for a while.

“Ned.”

He’d been silent for ten minutes or more, but he didn’t look around, his throat was tight and he wanted to hit something.

“Ned,” she said again, sliding her arm though his and moving closer to him. “I love you, and no spiteful comments from the likes of silly creatures like Mrs Norrell will change that.”

“P’raps,” he said, the words finding their way past the stiffness in his jaw when he’d wanted to keep them in. “But there’ll be others. People ye liked, people ye respected, and they’ll cut ye dead an’ all. What then?”

“Then I shall feel sorry for their narrowmindedness and congratulate myself on not being them,” she said, though the words were stilted now, a trace of anger running beneath them.

“I ought not have done it,” he carried on, guilt smothering him

like a wet wool blanket. His chest tightened, and it was hard to breathe as he made himself consider everything she'd given up by marrying him. "I ought to have found another way. I could have taken ye to people of yer own stamp, those who could have seen ye married to a good man, a—"

"If you say a gentleman, I shall hit you, Edward Hardy."

He looked around in surprise, startled by the sudden blaze of anger. Since the day they'd met, Grace had been sweet and gentle and shown no signs of temper, but those blue eyes held fury now and he hesitated.

"Don't you dare presume to tell me what is best for me," she said, her gaze full of heat and steel. "Don't you dare tell me I ought to be ashamed of you or my position as your wife! I lived a life where I was constantly afraid, I was locked away from the world, and let me tell you, Ned, a prison is still a prison no matter how gilded the cage may be." She reached out a hand and raised it to his cheek, turning his face towards her, where he could not escape the raw emotion in her expression.

"You set me free, Ned. For the first time in my life I have hope. I want to live with you and help you with the farm. I want to watch it grow as our family grows with it. I want to have your children and watch them grow into fine people. Perhaps we'll have sons: good, strong and kind boys like their father, the man I have fallen in love with, with every part of my heart and soul. I want no other, Ned. I want no other life. I want the life I've begun to dream of, with you, and if you try to take that from me or make me feel ashamed for wanting it, I shall never forgive you."

He wanted to believe her, so very badly, wanted everything that she wanted so fiercely it was a pain in his chest, the like of which he'd never known.

"Gracie," he said, her name catching in his throat. "I just want—"

"I know what you want, you foolish man," she said in exasperation. "But you must know what I want. Not what you think I ought to have, but what *I want*, and everything I want is sitting beside me right now, and that won't change."

"It might," he persisted. "The farm's not—"

"Not a place for a lady," she said, rolling her eyes. "Do give over, Ned. Did it ever occur to you that I don't *want* to be a lady? Do you have any idea how dull it is to be a lady?"

She laughed at his perplexed expression and shook her head.

"I'm happy," she said simply, gazing up at him with such

adoration his heart lurched in his chest. “That’s all, Ned. I’m happy, and if that ever changes, if ever there are things that make me unhappy, I promise to tell you, and then we can see what can be done about them, but I will only make that promise if you swear to do the same.”

“Me? Unhappy?” he said, so bewildered by the idea he gaped at her.

“Well, of course,” she said, and an uncertain look entered her eyes and she turned away from him. “I’m… I won’t be anything like the wife Sarah was to you, will I? I know I’ll never replace her,” she said, sounding awkward and a little diffident. “She was such a help to you, and I shall have so much to learn and I shall make a deal of mistakes. Likely… likely it will be you regretting our marriage soon enough, when you see what a mess I make of your life—”

He was so utterly stunned and outraged at the idea he could ever regret having married her that he didn’t notice the men who appeared from the shadows of the trees on either side of them.

By the time he’d realised what was happening, Grace was screaming as a man pulled her off the cart and two more attacked Ned. One of them delivered a blow to the back of his head that made him see stars, and he fell from the cart, hitting the frozen ground hard.

All he could hear was screaming. Grace was screaming. Fighting past the dazed sensation, he got to his feet just in time to dodge a foot that would have belted him in the gut. Instead, he caught hold of it and pulled hard, and the man who’d have kicked him fell with a grunt of pain. Before he could make sure he stayed down two more men were on either side of him and Ned knew from the looks in their eyes, they’d come for Grace, and they didn’t mean to leave without her.

Chapter 11

"Wherein the monster returns to threaten everything."



For a moment, Grace was overwhelmed with terror. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think past the ice gripping her heart and mind. An arm was tight about her throat and she was dragged violently from the cart. She screamed as she saw Ned being attacked on all sides. Three against one, it was so unfair, and fear was a living thing beneath her skin, and then she saw who it was that had her in his grip.

"Harold!" she spat, fury overcoming terror as she looked around into the cold blue eyes of her brother.

"Ah, my dearest sister," he said, tightening his hold on her throat as he held her still, her back pressed to his chest. "I underestimated you. Who'd have thought you'd be slut enough to ruin yourself with the first fellow you clapped eyes on?"

"I'm not ruined," she retorted. "I'm married, and if you hurt my husband, I'll see you hang."

Harold snorted at that. "I think not. No one will miss that ignorant brute. I doubt he can write his own name, and Carrington still wants you. You'll not be his wife now, of course, and I'll get a fraction of what I ought to have gotten, but it seems he still has a use for ruined goods."

The idea of ever being in Carrington's company again, of being taken away from Ned, was enough to spur her into action. She stamped on Harold's foot, hard, so hard he yelped and was startled enough that she could pull out of his hold.

He snatched for her again, and Grace allowed it, remembering the way Carrington had crumpled when, as Ned had said, she'd *kneed him in the bollocks.* She'd told Ned just moments ago that she did not wish to be a lady, and bearing in mind that a lady would have been expected to swoon in such circumstances, she knew how very right she'd been.

She brought her knee up with all the force she could muster and saw her brother's eyes bulge, heard the odd, squeaky sound he made as he expelled air from his lungs before falling to the ground, clutching his privates and moaning.

Breathing hard, she didn't wait around to see if he got up again

but scanned her surroundings, looking for something heavy to wield. Someone had been cutting wood in the field beyond the trees and she hurried forward, finding a long, slim branch from an oak tree that was stacked ready to be cut to size.

By the time she reached Ned, she saw to her satisfaction that one man was already out cold, and it looked as if Ned had broken the nose of one of the two who were still standing. To her horror, however, she saw they both carried knives, and that Ned was bleeding.

No.

No.

They must have assumed that her brother could subdue one, small female and were intent on the greater danger before them, as they never even glanced in her direction. Ned looked dangerous indeed. She'd never seen such a look of rage in his eyes and, by the wary manner in which the men were circling him, they weren't underestimating it either. Whether or not he wanted or needed, her help was neither here nor there, however. Ned was in trouble, and she was damned if she'd sit meekly by while these sorry excuses for men outnumbered him.

Moving as quietly as her rustling skirts would allow, she hefted the narrow log in both hands and swung it with all her might. It struck the back of the man's skull with a sickening thud that reverberated all the way up her arms and sent her stumbling backwards. She fell to the ground in an ungainly heap, but watched as her victim also fell, thudding to the earth like a stone, and she experienced a surge of triumph.

Too late, she looked up to see his companion lunging for her, his knife raised and a snarl on his face. She gasped and scrambled backwards but, before he could get close, Ned appeared and tackled the man to the ground with the force of a raging bull. They went down hard and the knife went flying, then all Grace could hear was the steady, *thwack*, *thwack* as Ned hit the man over and again.

"Ned," she cried, running to him. "Ned, stop! You'll kill him."

Not that she cared for the man's sake particularly, but she'd not let Ned live with such a thing on his conscience.

Ned seemed to be beyond the sound of her voice, though, and for a moment nothing reached him.

"Ned," she said again. "Ned, please…."

Her voice trembled and broke and then he stopped, looking around at her as she burst into tears.

“Gracie,” he said, the man beneath his fists forgotten at once as he pushed to his feet and ran to her. “Gracie, love, are ye hurt?”

“N-No….” she stammered, brushing his arms away as he tried to hold her so that she could run her hands over him. “B-But you are,” she sobbed, terrified that there was some dreadful injury beneath the blood-soaked shirt.

“’Tis not my blood, love,” he said, smiling a little as he tugged her back into his arms. “I broke the fellow’s nose, and he bled like a stuck pig.”

“You’re sure?” she demanded, putting her hands to his face. “You’re not hurt?”

He gave an impatient bark of laughter and hauled her into his arms, holding her so tight she couldn’t breathe. “A few bruises, no more. Oh, God. Oh, Grace. I thought I’d lost ye.”

His voice trembled a little, and she buried her face in his chest, breathing in the reassuring scent of him and listening to the rapid beat of his heart.

She was released just as suddenly and she stumbled, turning in shock to see why he’d moved away. Her brother was scrambling to his feet, but in three quick strides Ned closed the distance between them and hauled him up by his cravat. Harold looked like a rag doll in Ned’s powerful grasp, especially when Ned slammed him up against the nearest tree.

Her brother gasped and choked, his feet swinging a good four inches from the ground.

“You bastard,” Ned raged. “You miserable excuse for a man! I should wring your blasted neck and rid the world of a worthless cur.”

Harold whimpered and clawed at Ned’s fist to no avail.

“I know your kind,” Ned said with disgust. “Ye are a bully, willing enough to torment those who cannot fight back, but a coward when it comes to a real fight. Carrington is the same. Ye may tell him to come and face me, if he dares, but if I ever… *ever* set eyes on ye again, I’ll end your miserable life, my word upon it.”

Ned shook him again, his voice dropping to something low and feral. “I’ll come for ye when ye least expect it, and I’ll make sure ye die like the maggot ye are and feed what’s left to my pigs. Ye will not trouble my wife again and ye may tell Carrington I’ll come for him too, if he thinks to plot to take what is mine from me. If I ever hear either of ye breathe a word against Grace or do anything, *anything*, that upsets her, I’ll make ye wish ye had never been born.” He tightened his grip on Harold’s cravat and her brother gasped and

gaped, his eyes bulging. “Have I made myself clear?”

For a moment he released his hold, enough that Harold could nod and gasp something that seemed like acceptance of Ned’s terms.

“Don’t forget it,” Ned warned, “Or I might feel the need to visit my brother-in-law with some of my friends and remind ye of everything I just said.”

“W-Won’t forget,” Harold gasped, terror in his eyes. “Swear it.”

“Damn right,” Ned said giving him another little shake. “And ye will take care the filth ye brought with ye today are dealt with, and sent back to whatever hole in the ground they crawled out of.”

“Y-Yes.”

Ned released his hold and Harold fell from his grasp to land in a heap at his feet. For a long moment, Ned stood staring down at him, clenching and unclenching his fists, his desire to hurt Harold more than he already had so palpable that Grace held her breath.

Harold trembled and covered his head with his hands and began to cry, and Grace watched as Ned took a deep breath and turned away in disgust.

She ran to him and he held her in his arms, held her tight and safe as he kissed the top of her head.

“Let’s go home, love,” he said.



They did as Grace had proposed that morning when they returned to the farm, and she hurried to light the fires while Ned saw to the horse and checked on the other animals. By the time he’d finished and come in, she was sitting in his bed wearing nothing but a smile. Ned could hardly draw a breath as he paused in the doorway to stare at the sight of her, his beautiful wife. Her golden hair fell in lush waves and glimmered in the warm light of the fire and the single candle that burned on the nightstand. Her skin glowed too, the generous curves of her breasts making his mouth water far more than the tray she’d set before her, loaded with bread and cheese, a jar of pickle and some apples. Nonetheless, his stomach growled as he realised he’d not eaten since they’d breakfasted at The Stag.

“A picnic in bed?” he said, feeling his heart lift at the sight of her as desire blazed a path to his manly parts with the force of a lightning strike. “Now, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Well, it was your picnic downstairs that inspired me,” she said, tugging back the covers on his side of the bed and patting the mattress invitingly. “So I can’t take all the credit.”

He grinned at her and made short work of shrugging out of his clothes, marvelling at the way she sat naked and unashamed before him, and delighting in the pleasure she took in watching him undress.

Ned slid beneath the covers, and pulled her to him, desire rising like a tide as her silky skin touched his. He kissed her slow and deep, but she laughed and pushed him away.

“Eat first,” she insisted. “I could hear your stomach complaining when you were still downstairs.”

He huffed and protested, and she stuffed a piece of cheese into his mouth.

“Eat, you stubborn creature,” she said, laughing as he chewed and swallowed and then lunged for her, pretending to take a bite from her shoulder.

“I’d rather eat this tender flesh,” he murmured, kissing a path up her neck.

She sighed and tilted her head to allow him to continue.

“I’ll be the dessert,” she offered, and then Ned heard her stomach growl too.

“Ye only had to say ye were famished,” he remonstrated, and she smiled and kissed his nose.

“I know, but this way was more fun.”

They cleared the tray in no time at all and, once Ned had removed it from the bed, Grace leant back against his chest with a happy sigh.

“That’s better,” she said.

Ned held her, quiet as he remembered the moments before her brother’s thugs had attacked them. He remembered everything she’d said about how happy she was, how she loved him and looked forward to their lives together, and about how he must not imagine he knew what it was she wanted or needed better than she did. He stroked the golden tresses that tickled his chest and remembered the rest of it too, and frowned.

“Gracie,” he said, trying to puzzle out what she’d meant to say before her brother had tried to ruin everything. “What did ye mean before, when ye spoke of Sarah?”

He felt her stiffen a little in his arms and shifted them both so he could look into her eyes.

“Ye said some nonsense about making a mess or not being like Sarah.”

She looked away from him a small frown between her eyebrows.

Ned reached out and smoothed it away with a fingertip. “Gracie, ye promised to tell me if anything made ye unhappy.”

Grace turned back to him and let out a little huff. “I’m not unhappy, foolish man. Indeed, I’m horribly selfish and jealous, and you ought not put up with it or pander to it. Really, it’s nothing.”

“Jealous?” he said, incredulous and not a little intrigued to know what the devil she was on about. “What in blazes have ye to be jealous of?”

She stared at him as though he was being obtuse.

“What?” he demanded.

He watched as she rolled her eyes at him. “Of Sarah, of course,” she said, and then buried her face in his chest. “I know it’s horrid and I’m a bad person,” she mumbled. “But I’m jealous of the ten years she had with you, and of how good a wife she was to you, and… and I’m frightened I won’t measure up, that… that I’ll not be good enough.”

Ned blinked, so astonished he didn’t know what part of the ridiculous nonsense to address first.

“Gracie,” he said, finding it hard to keep the amusement from his voice as she burrowed further, clinging to him so he couldn’t look her in the eyes. “Gracie!” he protested, eventually resorting to hauling her out and pushing her gently onto her back, holding her down by the wrists.

“Where did ye get such a maggoty idea in yer head?” he demanded, and then his heart broke as he saw her eyes fill and she turned her head away from him. The foolish creature really believed it.

“Gracie, love, listen to me,” he said, his voice gentle. “Ye have it all wrong. I never loved Sarah.”

That got her attention, and he smiled as she stared up at him.

“But when you spoke of your marriage it… it sounded like such a happy partnership, like everything worked perfectly and—”

He snorted. “A business partnership maybe,” he allowed. “And that’s my fault for making it sound a deal happier than it was. Only, I didn’t want ye to think it was my fault, that… that I was a bad husband and didn’t care for her as I should.”

“Oh, Ned, no—”

“She tricked me into marrying her,” he said, not letting her finish.

“What?”

Her blue eyes blazed with indignation, and he laughed and pulled

her into his arms and told her of the night Sarah had gotten him drunk and taken him into the stables behind the pub he'd been drinking at. Looking back on it, she must have been damned determined, for it had been the only time she'd given herself to him willingly.

"She told me she was with child, so I married her," he said with a shrug. "But she never wanted me. Her ma had died when she was young and she'd run her father's farm with him since she was a girl, but then her pa married again, and his new wife took over and put Sarah's nose out of joint, I reckon."

"So she decided she'd find another farm to run," Grace said, looking so furious he could do nothing but smile helplessly at her.

"Aye," he said, nuzzling into her silky hair and breathing in the sweet scent of her. "But she only wanted the farm, not me. What she wanted most was to lord it over her stepmother and show how successful she'd been in marrying a man with a bigger place than her father. She couldn't bear it when I touched her, and there never were any children. I barely knew her, Gracie, and I certainly didn't love her, though I swear I tried. I tried to make things better between us, more like they ought to be, but…."

He shrugged. He'd never been able to figure Sarah out, and he certainly wasn't going to spend any more time trying.

"Oh, Ned," Grace said, her eyes filling once again, but for him this time. "Oh, my love, I'm so sorry. You must have been so lonely."

"Yes," he said, trailing a fingertip down her cheek. "But I'm grateful now, grateful that things worked out as they did, so that I was here, waiting for ye. For now I know how precious this is, what is between us."

"Oh," she said with a sigh. "Ned, you do say the loveliest things." She snuggled into him again. "Do you… do you think you might love me, then… a little at least?"

He gave a bark of laughter, and turned her onto her back once more. "A little bit!" he exclaimed. "Hell's bells, woman, do ye not know I'm head over ears in love with ye, foolish creature?" He huffed and shook his head. "A little bit," he repeated, rolling his eyes.

"Really?" she said, a smile dawning over her lovely mouth that stole his breath and his heart all over again.

"How could ye not know?" he demanded, genuinely perplexed. "Surely ye could see it from the start? Lord knows I couldn't hide it."

"I didn't," she said, shaking her head. "Truly. I just thought you a lovely man whose nature was to be sweet and kind."

“Well then.” He moved between her legs and she coiled about him at once, tugging him closer, welcoming him. “I love ye, Gracie,” he said, and then gasped as he slid inside the fierce, slick heat of her. “I love ye with all my heart, I shall worship ye with my body, and I’d do anything, anything at all to make ye happy.”

Grace laughed with delight and tugged at his neck, pulling his head down for a kiss he was more than willing to give her.

“Just love me, Ned,” she said, her head tipping back and her eyes falling closed as he thrust deeper inside her, and the pleasure of it overwhelmed him. “Just love me.”

Epilogue

"Wherein the merriest of Christmas celebrations."



Grace surveyed the table with satisfaction. The Christmas goose looked splendid, all crisp, golden skin, and trimmed with holly. The potatoes were not burned, and the splendid variety of vegetables were still identifiable as what they had started out being, instead of a pulpy mush. The brawn had been the most disgusting thing she'd ever tackled in her whole life, but she was determined to be a good farmer's wife, aware she would need a strong stomach at times. So, she'd cleaned and boiled the pig's head—somehow without casting up her accounts—and made brawn for the first time in her life. It looked just as it ought, and she hoped that she could also be brave enough to actually eat it now she knew how it was made.

There was also a plate piled high with mince pies, and Mrs Tucknott's impressive Christmas pudding was steaming away merrily. Grace had dutifully fed it with a tot of brandy every day, under Ned's instruction, and it smelled divine. They'd filled the house with Christmas greenery and the scent of it mingled with the cooking, fresh and clean and wintery. The old farmhouse looked splendid and welcoming, dressed up in its seasonal finery.

The front door banged shut, and she looked up, her heart leaping with anticipation. It was barely six weeks since she'd met him, but now Grace could imagine no other life than the delightful one she led with her wonderful husband.

"Where's the lass who lives in this abode?" Ned demanded, his tone gruff as he strode into the kitchen, bringing with him the fresh air smell of the freezing day outside and all the earthy scents of horses and hay and hardworking male that Grace adored.

"Here, sir," Grace said, dipping a curtsey like a serving maid as Ned grinned at her.

He set down his muddy boots on the cloth by the door and advanced, holding a sprig of mistletoe over his head. "Come here, wench," he growled as Grace squealed and ran around the kitchen table.

"Oh, no, sir, I must not. I'm a respectable married lady, and my husband is a dangerous and jealous man."

"But your husband is not here," Ned replied, waggling his

eyebrows in his best theatrical villain imitation. “And I’m in need of a pretty girl to kiss and debauch.”

“He’ll kill you, sir,” Grace said, pretending to look shocked as she pressed her hands to her breast. “A big, handsome man my husband is, and—” She batted her eyelashes and tried her best to look like an innocent maid. “And I want no other,” she said piously.

“We’ll see about that,” Ned chuckled and swept one arm about her waist and kissed her ruthlessly as he suspended the mistletoe over her head.

“Oh, sir,” Grace said with a dazed sigh when he finally let her go. Her hands moved over him, and she delighted in the tortured groan that escaped him when she moved her palm over the fall on his britches and found him hard and ready for her. “What a wicked fellow you are,” she murmured.

The mistletoe was flung aside, and Ned lifted her, setting her down on the nearest available surface and pushing her skirts up with impatient hands as she fumbled with his buttons to free his straining cock.

There were a few seconds of frantic scrabbling and then Grace gasped as he entered her in one, fierce thrust. She laughed as he groaned with pleasure and then tugged at the bodice of her gown to expose her breasts.

“Now then, pretty wench, do ye still think on yer big, handsome husband?” he demanded, the words breathless as he leered at her and one large hand squeezed her breast lasciviously.

“Oh, Ned,” she said, dissolving into giggles, delighted by him, by his willingness to be silly and make her laugh, and by how well he loved her.

“Ah, Gracie,” he said with reproach. “I thought I was the villain,” he muttered, nipping at her ear.

She smiled and tipped her head back, her breath leaving her in a rush as his mouth trailed hot, damp kisses down her throat to her breast.

“You’re everything, Ned,” she said, and then her ability to think or speak dissolved as the heat of his mouth encompassed one taut nipple and he sucked.

It didn’t take long to find that glittering pinnacle of pleasure and she came quickly and hard and he followed not long after, holding her tight and pressing his face into her hair as his ragged breathing evened out.

“Wicked man,” she said to him, stroking the passion-dampened skin beneath his shirt. “You’ll spoil my lovely dinner if you don’t sit down at once.”

He turned his head to look at the table and gave a low whistle. “Would ye look at that,” he said, shaking his head. “Fit for a king, that is.”

Grace snorted. “I’m not sure about that, but I think it might just be edible,” she added, with no little pride in her achievement. “But it’ll be cold if you don’t hurry.”

He set her carefully on the floor again and kissed her nose before they troubled to clean themselves up and sit down to the feast she’d prepared.

“Will you do the honours, please, Ned?” she asked, handing him the carving knife and fork and gesturing to the goose.

“With pleasure, love, only….” He looked a little sheepish and set the knife and pronged fork down again. “I have something for ye.”

Grace watched as he reached into his waistcoat pocket and drew out a small box.

“Merry Christmas, Gracie,” he said, handing it to her.

“Oh, Ned,” she said, her heart aching with happiness as she saw the pleasure in his eyes, and the anxiety too.

She took the box from him and smiled helplessly as she opened it and saw the silver locket and chain nestled on a bed of blue silk.

“I thought perhaps we could have miniatures done, of our children… when….”

He trailed off, looking a little awkward.

“Oh, Ned!” she exclaimed and got up to fling herself into his lap and kiss him hard.

“You like it?” he said, grinning happily now.

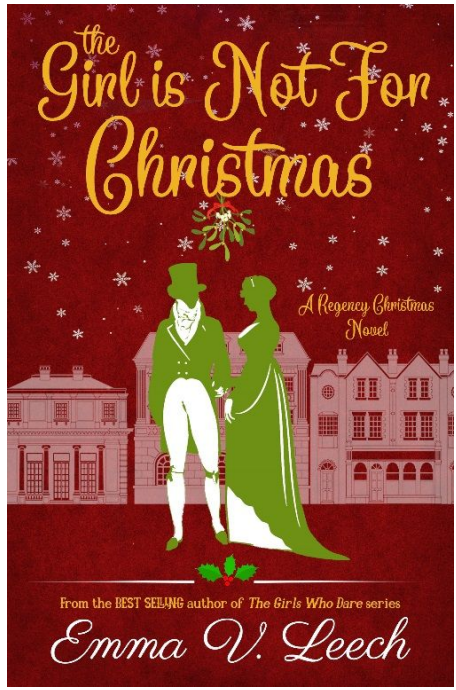
“I love it,” she said, hugging him with all her might. “And I love you, Ned.”

“Ah, well,” he said, wrapping his arms about her. “There’s no denying ye are a foolish creature, but I love ye something fierce just the same.”

And then he kissed her.

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About Me!



I started this incredible journey way back in 2010 with The Key to Erebus but didn't summon the courage to hit publish until October 2012. For anyone who's done it, you'll know publishing your first title is a terribly scary thing! I still get butterflies on the morning a new title releases but the terror has subsided at least. Now I just live in dread of the day my daughters are old enough to read them.

The horror! (On both sides I suspect.)

2017 marked the year that I made my first foray into Historical Romance and the world of the Regency Romance, and my word what a year! I was delighted by the response to this series and can't wait to add more titles. Paranormal Romance readers need not despair however as there is much more to come there too. Writing has become an addiction and as soon as one book is over I'm hugely excited to start the next so you can expect plenty more in the future.

As many of my works reflect I am greatly influenced by the beautiful French countryside in which I live. I've been here in the South West for the past twenty years though I was born and raised in England. My three gorgeous girls are all bilingual and the youngest who is only six, is showing signs of following in my footsteps after producing *The Lonely Princess* all by herself.

I'm told book two is coming soon ...

She's keeping me on my toes, so I'd better get cracking!

KEEP READING TO DISCOVER MY OTHER BOOKS!

Other Works by Emma V. Leech

(For those of you who have read The French Fae Legend series, please remember that chronologically The Heart of Arima precedes The Dark Prince)

Daring Daughters



Daring Daughters Series

Girls Who Dare



Girls Who Dare Series

Rogues & Gentlemen



Rogues & Gentlemen Series

The Regency Romance Mysteries



The Regency Romance Mysteries Series

The French Vampire Legend



The French Vampire Legend Series

The French Fae Legend



The French Fae Legend Series

Stand Alone

The Book Lover (a paranormal novella)
The Girl is Not for Christmas (Regency Romance)

Audio Books!

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Girls Who Dare– The exciting new series from Emma V Leech, the multi-award-winning, Amazon Top 10 romance writer behind the Rogues & Gentlemen series.

Inside every wallflower is the beating heart of a lioness, a passionate individual willing to risk all for their dream, if only they can find the courage to begin. When these overlooked girls make a pact to change their lives, anything can happen.

Eleven girls – Eleven dares in a hat. Twelve stories of passion. Who will dare to risk it all?

To Dare a Duke

Girls Who Dare Book 1



Dreams of true love and happy ever afters

Dreams of love are all well and good, but all Prunella Chuffington-Smythe wants is to publish her novel. Marriage at the price of her independence is something she will not consider. Having tasted success writing under a false name in The Lady's Weekly Review, her alter ego is attaining notoriety and fame and Prue rather likes it.

A Duty that must be endured

Robert Adolphus, The Duke of Bedwin, is in no hurry to marry, he's done it once and repeating that disaster is the last thing he desires. Yet, an heir is a necessary evil for a duke and one he cannot shirk. A dark reputation precedes him though, his first wife may have died young, but the scandals the beautiful, vivacious and spiteful creature supplied the ton have not. A wife must be found. A wife who is neither beautiful or vivacious but sweet and dull, and certain to stay out of trouble.

Dared to do something drastic

The sudden interest of a certain dastardly duke is as bewildering as it is unwelcome. She'll not throw her ambitions aside to marry a scoundrel just as her plans for self-sufficiency and freedom are coming to fruition. Surely showing the man she's not actually the meek little wallflower he is looking for should be enough to put paid to his intentions? When Prue is dared by her friends to do something drastic, it seems the perfect opportunity to kill two birds.

However, Prue cannot help being intrigued by the rogue who has inspired so many of her romances. Ordinarily, he plays the part of handsome rake, set on destroying her plucky heroine. But is he really the villain of the piece this time, or could he be the hero?

Finding out will be dangerous, but it just might inspire her greatest story yet.

To Dare a Duke

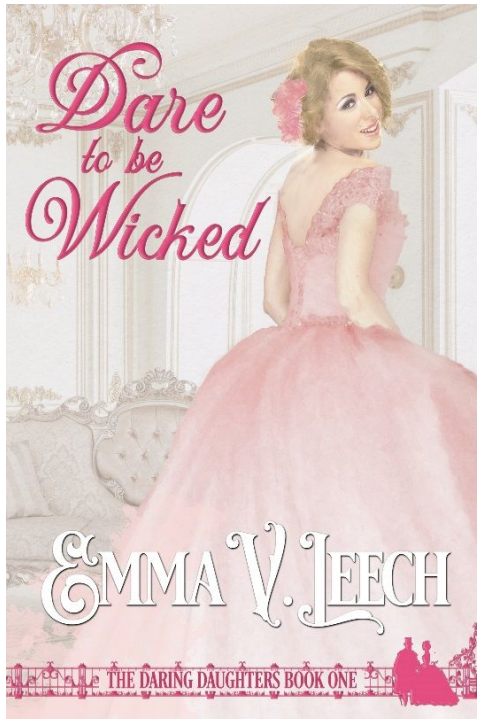
From the author of the bestselling Girls Who Dare Series – An exciting new series featuring the children of the Girls Who Dare...

The stories of the **Peculiar Ladies Book Club** and their hatful of dares has become legend among their children. When the hat is rediscovered, dusty and forlorn, the remaining dares spark a series of events that will echo through all the families... and their

Daring Daughters

Dare to be Wicked

Daring Daughters Book One



Two daring daughters …

Lady Elizabeth and Lady Charlotte are the daughters of the Duke and Duchess of Bedwin. Raised by an unconventional mother and an indulgent, if overprotective father, they both strain against the rigid morality of the era.

The fashionable image of a meek, weak young lady, prone to swooning at the least provocation, is one that makes them seethe with frustration.

Their handsome childhood friend …

Cassius Cadogen, Viscount Oakley, is the only child of the Earl and Countess St Clair. Beloved and indulged, he is popular, gloriously handsome, and a talented artist.

Returning from two years of study in France, his friendship with both sisters becomes strained as jealousy raises its head. A situation not helped by the two mysterious Frenchmen who have accompanied him home.

And simmering sibling rivalry …

Passion, art, and secrets prove to be a combustible combination, and someone will undoubtedly get burned.

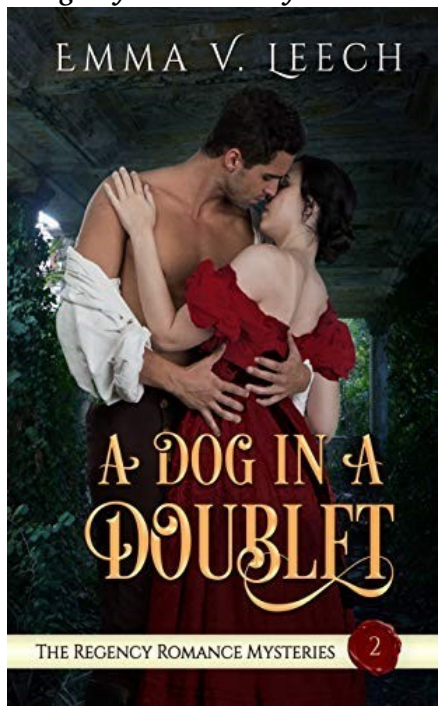
Available February 19, 2021

Pre Order your copy here: Dare to be Wicked

Interested in a Regency Romance with a twist?

A Dog in a Doublet

The Regency Romance Mysteries Book 2



A man with a past

Harry Browning was a motherless guttersnipe, and the morning he came across the elderly Alexander Preston, The Viscount Stamford, clinging to a sheer rock face he didn't believe in fate. But the fates have plans for Harry whether he believes or not, and he's not entirely sure he likes them.

As a reward for his bravery, and in an unusual moment of charity, miserly Lord Stamford takes him on. He is taught to read, to manage the vast and crumbling estate, and to behave like a gentleman, but Harry knows that is something he will never truly be.

Already running from a dark past, his future is becoming increasingly complex as he finds himself caught in a tangled web of jealousy and revenge.

A feisty young maiden

Temptation, in the form of the lovely Lady Clarinda Bow, is a constant threat to his peace of mind, enticing him to be something he isn't. But when the old man dies his will makes a surprising demand, and the fates might just give Harry the chance to have everything he ever desired, including Clara, if only he dares.

And as those close to the Preston family begin to die, Harry may not have any choice.

A Dog in a Doublet

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A huge thank you to all of Emma's Book Club members! You guys are the best!

I'm always so happy to hear from you so do email or message me :)

emmavleech@orange.fr

To my husband Pat and my family ... For always being proud of me.